DYLAN PATRICK
THE SPIDER

Dedicated with love

to my family, your unwavering support

and belief made this achievement possible.

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First Edition 2026

ISBN: 978-1-0696755-0-7

Published in Canada by: Dylan Patrick Writing

THE SPIDER

A NOVEL

Dylan Patrick

Dylan Patrick Writing

The agent stood there taking in the ornate artwork that decorated the halls of Oscorp's Grand Foyer. He carefully examined the intricacies of the archaic statues, thinking relics such as these belong in museums, not in the lobbies of modern-day corporations. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a woman's heels echoing off the polished marble floor. The agent turned to find the source of the sound to be a young, slim secretary approaching. Her hair was bobbed, and she wore a unique style of glasses.

"Good morning. Mr. Osborn has asked me to see you in now, sir," she said.

The agent nodded, following her as she led him down the hallway corridor.

"Thank you," he said, as he walked through the office door.

She smiled, acknowledging the gesture, as she shut the door behind him.

"Mr. Osborn, it's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Special Agent Dugan."

The agent greeted him with a firm handshake. Norman believed a firm handshake said a lot about a person.

"The pleasure's mine. Please, take a seat," said Norman, as he made his way around the boardroom table.

The agent sat down, placing his briefcase on the floor beside him.

"I appreciate your time this morning, Mr. Osborn. I'm here on behalf of The Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division. I've been assigned with briefing you on a series of military-controlled projects that were conducted in the past. I was informed that following this briefing you'll be meeting with my superiors and some of the team later this week to discuss the direction of Oscorp's research in NeoGenics."

"Yes, that's right," said Norman.

"Excellent. Let's begin, shall we?"

Norman smiled. "Please," he said, as he sat down across from the man.

The agent leaned over, pulling a folder out of his briefcase, and stared at Norman for a moment.

"The document I have here is highly classified and considered a

matter of National Security. I'm sure you're aware of the implications if this information were to be leaked?" asked the agent, directly.

Norman nodded as he glanced down curiously at the document in the agent's hand. The military projects the agent spoke of were a topic that came up in Norman's last meeting. Oscorp's research in NeoGenics had recently been offered military funding as a third-party research and developer for the Department of Defense, under the United States Military. They proposed their current contract with Oscorp's Weapons Division be expanded to include its NeoGenics Division and Institution of Oceanography. The new contract would be overseen by a specialized division called S.H.I.E.L.D.

The agent slid the document across the table as Norman focused on the red bold letters: Project Captain America. Norman opened the document and glanced down at the page, uncertain of what this could be, or what it would mean for Oscorp.

Berlin, Germany, 1939; Johann Shmidt, Generaloberst of the German Regime Hydra, conducted the first successful Human Enhancement Project ever documented. They developed an amber-colored, protein-rich liquid that separates out when blood coagulates. The blood serum of an animal, used especially to provide immunity to a pathogen or toxin by inoculation or as a diagnostic agent, was used to replace a sequence of antigens in the human genome.

German military first authorized the project in 1918, prior to the end of the First World War. Thus began the development of the formula and equipment needed for the project. When the Second World War began, the German Regime Hydra took over the project, appointing Generaloberst Johann Shmidt. It was he who authorized the experimental testing of the serum on volunteer soldiers selected from the German infantry. Clinical trials began; test subjects were brought in and medically screened. Those that met the program's criteria had the serum administered and were closely studied. The results concluded that subjects who managed to survive the administration process were often left in a state of chronic agony and, in many cases, completely unrecognizable before eventually succumbing to the procedure. Consequentially, after a year of clinical trials, the German Military's Defense Department reviewed the project. The Hydra scientists had very little success in proving capable of producing a living test subject. The Chief Geneticist of the project, Dr. Arnim Zola, admittedly revealed that there was an extremely small probability that the diagnostic agent would ever replace the correct sequence of antigens in the test subject's genome. Despite their shortcomings, funding continued, and the scientists were instructed to resume trialing the serum.

It wasn't until the winter of 1940 that they would have a breakthrough with

an unlikely candidate: an American prisoner named James Buchanan Barnes. Barnes was an espionage agent that had been deployed to Germany under orders to infiltrate the Hydra Regime. He eventually succeeded, managing to smuggle the Super Soldier formula back to the United States in clay pottery. However, before the American agent could get out of Germany, he was captured and imprisoned by the Hydra Regime.

Following the Germans' defeat in the Second World War, American Intelligence confiscated classified Hydra documents which revealed James Barnes was brutally tortured during his imprisonment. He was subject to several experiments, including sleep deprivation, electroshock therapy, and cerebral reprogramming. The results led the American Central Intelligence Agency to adopt a similar practice in Project: MKUltra.

The classified German documents indicated that Generaloberst Johann Shmidt approved the American prisoner for the Human Enhancement Project. James Barnes was deemed fit for clinical trials following the torturous procedure, having undergone extensive reconditioning. The Hydra Scientists were instructed to administer the Super Soldier Serum to the recently reprogrammed espionage agent. The document disclosed the Hydra Regime's Chief Geneticist, Dr. Arnim Zola's written analysis, concluding the serum had successfully sequenced the American's blood.

Generaloberst Shmidt authorized field testing as soon as the soldier was medically cleared. The Germans began a series of mock tests to ascertain the subject's capabilities. They discovered the American had gained tremendous aptitude in his physical abilities in comparison to the average soldier's test scores that were recorded before the serum was administered. Barnes proved to be highly adaptable in every situation that was presented, seemingly unshakable, demonstrating the ability to remain focused under the most extreme conditions. His nervous system improved due to an estimated 200% increase in lung capacity, allowing for greater cardiovascular and muscle endurance while demonstrating an astounding increase in physical strength and agility. The subject's neurological processing and reaction time was measured by pressing a button on a controller when the light would change on a screen in front of him. The subject's reaction time was documented in comparison to the average soldier's response time. He was measured at 0.28 milliseconds: more than six times the speed of the average soldier at 1.78 milliseconds. The subject's ability to physically recover when injured may have been the most notable observation documented. Analysis of the subject's blood samples revealed that the cell division, mitosis, significantly increased the process rate of regeneration. Mitosis is the process of cell division, which is crucial for regeneration, enabling organisms to replace damaged or lost tissues by producing new, genetically identical cells, making him resilient to natural fluctuations, such as disease and other forms of potential damage. However, the discovery seemed to change the direction

that the project was initially going in. The German Defense Department became more interested in understanding what promotes the stem cells to form a blastema, an accumulation of stem cells at the point of tissue damage. Blood samples that were taken and analyzed concluded that the subject's blood cells weren't aging the way a normal person's blood cells age. This was a scientific breakthrough like no other, and the first successful Human Enhancement Project that had ever been documented. The classified records that were confiscated from the Hydra Regime following the Second World War confirmed the Germans' first successful Super Soldier to be American test subject, James Buchanan Barnes. The American military later reopened the case, naming it Project: Winter Soldier.

Following the discovery, several months of testing the subject`s blood ensued. The German Military's Defense Department, now heavily involved, were particularly interested in the cellular mitosis and regeneration rate of the blood cells. Telomeres, protective DNA sequences at the ends of chromosomes, play a significant role in the aging process. Telomeres act like protective caps, preventing the ends of chromosomes from being damaged during cell division. As cells divide, telomeres progressively shorten. However, blood samples taken from the subject revealed that the telomeres did not appear to shorten, leading the German geneticists to theorize whether they had found a way to slow the aging process, which caused the German Defense Department to question if they had somehow discovered the key to immortality.

Realizing they were transitioning away from the Super Soldier Human Enhancement Project, Generaloberst Shmidt strongly urged that they move forward with continued trials. However, the next round of clinical trials conducted were unsuccessful. The serum sequencing failed to replace the desired antigens in the subject's DNA, and Johann Shmidt was requested to meet with the German Military's Defense Department. It was noted in the classified German documents that the Chief Geneticist of the Hydra Regime's Super Soldier Project, Dr. Arnim Zola, was also present at the meeting in support of continued trials. Generaloberst Shmidt was on record in the German document arguing that they had already perfected the serum; the American test subject, James Barnes, was conclusive evidence. It was simply a matter of the serum sequencing the DNA correctly and the subject's blood either accepting or rejecting the new sequencing.

The German Defense Department expressed concerns with continuing clinical trials before thoroughly examining the results of the experiment. The decision was reached: the subject's blood would be analyzed to understand how the serum had sequenced the American espionage agent's genome. The question remaining was, what genes had been activated, and which genes were replaced for the serum to produce these results? Naturally, this would take time, which Shmidt knew would be limited due to the project's funding.

Clinical trials had been postponed in order to analyze the blood of the American subject, which was presumed to be the cause of the Generaloberst's irrational behavior. The lengthy German report detailed that Johann Shmidt violated the chain of command, breaking Hydra protocol in March of 1941. He was suspected of giving unsanctioned orders to James Barnes before releasing the American test subject arbitrarily. However, the classified German documents indicated that the alleged orders that Johann Shmidt gave to the American soldier could not be substantiated. After releasing the American soldier, Shmidt administered the Super Soldier Serum to himself, independently. He was later found in the Hydra laboratory in a state of agony. The process had left him completely unrecognizable, having become grotesque in appearance. The Germans had documented similar reactions to the serum with other test subjects, all of which were fatal. Johann Shmidt was transported to the infirmary with little hope of survival, where they studied the effects of the serum. They worked feverishly to stabilize him, analyzing his blood samples to try and understand what was happening to him genetically. The reaction he had to the serum caused alopecia universalis, leaving him completely hairless. His skin had turned blood red, and he appeared to be in a state of hypovolemic shock, causing severe dehydration. It was as if all the liquid in his body had dried up, causing his skin to appear as though it had melted to his bones. The medical report described his appearance as terrifying, likened to that of a red skeleton.

Blood samples taken from Johann Shmidt were compared to what was observed in the blood samples taken from James Barnes, which appeared strikingly similar. Many aspects of regeneration appeared to be present from the signals which turn on the regenerative processes. However, the process of regeneration can either be complete, in which the new tissues formed will be the same as the old tissues lost, or incomplete, in which fibrosis follows after necrotic tissues form. As was the case for Johann Shmidt, the process of regeneration was present but incomplete, developing fibrosis after necrotic tissues formed. He was terrifying to behold, desperately clinging to life. He was treated and held in quarantine for further examination by those who had assumed command of Hydra. It was a miracle he survived the trauma, yet somehow, he had. What the medical staff failed to realize during their examination was that aside from his physical appearance, the serum had worked. It's unclear what became of Johann Shmidt, as he managed to escape German custody. Medical files state he was found strangling a doctor from his bedside once regaining consciousness. Following the incident, it was documented that the nurse that witnessed the event went into shock due to the horrifying appearance of the former Generaloberst. Johann Shmidt was never apprehended and was considered a traitor by German authorities. Upon discovering that Shmidt could still be active, the Americans reopened the file, naming it Project: Red Skull.

During that time, the American military had been focused on developing a program of their own to counteract the German Regime, Hydra. The Department of Defense approved a division akin to the Central Intelligence Agency called the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division, also known as S.H.I.E.L.D. Leading the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency was Director Howard Stark. The political and corporate influence he commanded with Stark Industries, combined with government funding from the U.S. military, had afforded him the ability to acquire the expertise of two prominent figures: German-born Geneticist Dr. Abraham Erskine and Russian-born Biomedical Mechatronics Engineer Dr. Anton Vanko.

Dr. Erskine led S.H.I.E.L.D.'s Genetics Division and was responsible for reengineering the Super Soldier formula. Dr. Vanko was Head of Natural Science and Biomedical Mechatronics Engineering Research. Together, they were able to reengineer the formula and equipment required, using the Hydra Human Enhancement Project documents that were smuggled out of Germany by Espionage Agent James Buchanan Barnes. When the laboratories were built and the formula was completed, S.H.I.E.L.D. approved clinical trials and commissioned a project similar to the Hydra experiments. Dr. Erskine was an invaluable asset, having worked with some of the original team of genetic engineers commissioned by the German military in 1918 to develop Project: Ubermench.

In 1936, Dr. Abraham Erskine met Dr. Arnim Zola while working for the German military. At the time, they were still in the developmental stages of the formula, before Johann Shmidt got involved and recruited Arnim Zola into the Hydra Regime. However, Dr. Erskine didn't share Johann Shmidt's ideals for the Hydra Regime and sought refuge under the United States Government. Following his recruitment into S.H.I.E.L.D., Dr. Erskine went on to lead the United States military to develop their first successful Human Enhancement Program, Project: Captain America.

Steve Rogers was the American military's only test subject to successfully become a Super Soldier. Using the same criteria the Hydra Regime used for their program, they replicated the tests the German soldiers were required to perform. Rogers was documented as scoring slightly lower in physical aptitude than the Hydra subject, James Barnes. However, the most notable difference in the test score was Rogers mental aptitude, scoring much higher on the test than his counterpart. The American demonstrated superior problem-solving skills in comparison to his predecessor created by the Hydra Regime. This was believed to be due to the cerebral reprogramming that was utilized to manipulate Barnes.

The Germans received word that the Americans had produced a Super Soldier with their serum. In response, the Germans activated Heinz Kruger, a German espionage agent that had managed to infiltrate the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency. Kruger sabotaged the project, destroying the formula, essential

equipment, and assassinated Dr. Abraham Erskine. Kruger was shot and killed following the assassination of Dr. Erskine. However, as a result, the U.S. military lost the ability to further develop the project.

In 1945, the war ended, and the Germans had been defeated. Chief Geneticist of the Hydra Regime, Dr. Arnim Zola, had been imprisoned by the American government, and held in a military prison camp located in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Howard Stark was hard-pressed by circumstance following the assassination of their Chief Geneticist, Dr. Erskine. Aware that his project funding would end if he didn't act swiftly, and knowing no other expert more qualified in the field of Genetic Science than Dr. Arnim Zola, Stark requested a meeting with the German Scientist and made him an offer. He offered Dr. Zola immunity under the condition that he work for S.H.I.E.L.D.

Dr. Zola accepted Howard Stark's offer with a condition of his own: that he would be allowed to bring his disabled son, Odo, from Germany, whom he had not seen since the war began. Dr. Zola's son suffered from a rare form of spina bifida, making it extremely challenging to walk unassisted, often confining him to a wheelchair, and in need of constant care. Howard agreed, and Dr. Zola began redeveloping the formula, while Dr. Vanko worked diligently to rebuild the equipment that was destroyed.

Dr. Vanko developed many notable projects for the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency. In 1939, he invented Arc technology, a self-sustaining clean energy that still powers Stark Industries to this day. He was later commissioned to create weapons out of an extremely rare, lightweight metal that the American military had acquired, called vibranium. He designed what was said to be an indestructible shield, given to the American Super Soldier, Steve Rogers. He fashioned two whips, consisting of both vibranium and Arc powered technology. The metal was chained together masterfully, granting flexibility, and consisted of a high-temperature plasma Arc that could melt and vaporize metal. The device was so powerful it could cut a solid iron cube in half. To further demonstrate his ability and ingenuity to adapt his Arc technology to the rare metal, he constructed a pair of vibranium attachments that mounted halfway up the forearm. The device could produce an acoustic shock wave powerful enough to turn a two-story concrete duplex to rubble.

Dr. Vanko's final creation was an unsanctioned, uniquely crafted device. The apparatus was an Arc powered mechanical set of specialized clutching appendages that were made of vibranium. The device was specifically designed to interface with the user's cerebral cortex and central nervous system. However, the apparatus was not a weapons design and had not been sanctioned by command. It was reportedly done in an attempt to assist Dr. Arnim Zola's crippled son, Odo, with mobility. Dr. Vanko pitied the child, having a son close in age back home in Russia. He allegedly grew close to the boy, as Dr. Arnim Zola brought Odo to the S.H.I.E.L.D. laboratory regularly. Dr. Vanko asserted that the research used to create the device could be utilized

to develop future projects but was severely reprimanded for using the extremely rare metal for his own interests without authorization. Internal tensions grew within the military organization following the incident, eventually leading Stark to accuse Dr. Vanko, his long-time partner and Biomedical Mechatronics Engineer, of treason. Stark claimed Dr. Vanko leaked Arc technology to the Russians, and had him imprisoned, leaving Dr. Vanko's Arc technology a patented Stark secret.

Following the assassination of Dr. Abraham Erskine and the alleged betrayal of his longtime partner, Dr. Anton Vanko, Howard Stark had become increasingly paranoid, believing there were traitors among the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency. He assigned a hand-picked security team to guard his home and family around the clock, providing a military escort at all times. Stark was a prudent man whose schedule was strictly managed and meticulously followed. However, on December 16th, 1961, he uncharacteristically broke protocol to attend a Christmas Charity Event with his wife that was being held at Stark Industries. The event had not been scheduled with his security team, and Stark decided to drive to the event unescorted. He and his wife were found executed in the vehicle by local authorities.

Classified records indicate they were able to identify the suspect responsible using eyewitness testimony with the assistance of a sketch artist. The suspect was later identified as former S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent James Buchanan Barnes. Barnes was seen firing four shots through the driver side window into the head and chest of Howard Stark. He then proceeded to the passenger side of the vehicle, firing two shots in both the head and chest of Maria Stark.

It was noted in the classified Hydra documents that were confiscated from the Germans following their defeat, that it was presumed that Johann Shmidt had given orders to Barnes prior to releasing him. The Central Intelligence Agency concluded that Barnes was instructed to operate as a shadow agent with the purpose of assassinating Howard Stark.

Stark Industries Weapons Division had been funded as a third-party entity by the United States military and profited heavily from the war. It was well documented that Stark Industries was the driving force that supplied the American military with weapons and ammunition throughout the Second World War. This was likely the motive behind the orders to eliminate the CEO and Owner of Stark Industries. James Barnes waited twenty years for Howard Stark to break protocol before he was able to successfully strike and assassinate the S.H.I.E.L.D. Director.

Howard and Maria Stark's death left their seven-month-old son, Anthony Stark, orphaned. Anthony Stark was a child prodigy, educated in mechanical engineering at MIT, who would go on to graduate at the age of fifteen. He was later groomed in warfare at Stark Industries by Obadiah Stane. Stane was appointed as interim CEO of Stark Industries and was Anthony's mentor until

he came of age to inherit the family business.

Following the death of Howard Stark, the Department of Defense appointed a new Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. in January of 1962. Head Military Scientist of Biochemical Nuclear Warfare, Dr. Bruce Banner. However, Dr. Banner's time in command was brief, as he was attempting to study a form of radiation called, gamma radiation.

The electromagnetic spectrum is divided into seven regions in order of decreasing wavelength and increasing energy and frequency. The common designations are radio waves, microwaves, infrared, visible light, ultraviolet, X-rays and gamma rays. This broad range of wavelengths are known as the electromagnetic spectrum. Gamma rays fall in the range of the electromagnetic spectrum above soft x-rays. Gamma rays and hard X-rays overlap in the electromagnetic spectrum, making it extremely hard to differentiate them. Both gamma rays and X-rays have enough energy to cause damage to living tissue. To summarize gamma radiation, it is the shortest wavelength, with the highest energy in the electromagnetic spectrum.

Although preventive measures were taken while conducting his research, Banner started showing signs of radiation sickness, falling ill in May of 1962. It was the most violent recording of radiation poisoning ever documented by the American military.

Banner was taken to a military base located in New Mexico for medical observation under the command of, General Thaddeus E. Ross. It was observed in Dr. Banner's blood samples that mitosis appeared to significantly increase the cell division and process rate of regeneration. Several aspects of regeneration appeared to be present from the signals which turn on the regenerative processes. However, the tissues that formed were unlike the tissues that were lost, signifying the process was incomplete, in which fibrosis followed after necrotic tissue had begun to form. Banner's skin appeared dead, becoming grey in color, displaying similarities to what was recorded in Johann Shmidt's documented case. However, Dr. Banner's cells were reproducing at a far greater rate of regeneration than what was recorded in the blood samples taken from the Super Soldiers or from Project: Red Skull.

It was reported that after twenty-eight days of hospitalization, Dr. Bruce Banner's dermal layer of skin could no longer be penetrated by needle for blood samples. When nurses tried to change his peripheral intravenous catheter that had been administered in Banner's forearm which was required to be changed every seven days, they could not replace it.

They also observed that Dr. Banner's skeletal structure appeared to be noticeably larger than when he arrived at the military base hospital. Banner's military records and past physical examinations had him measuring at 5'9 in height, 136 lbs in weight. Aside from an IV that was administered upon arrival, he had been unconscious and unable to consume solid food. Yet

somehow, he appeared to grow in size and gain mass. This was documented by Elizabeth Ross, Chief Nurse of the Military Corps and daughter of, General Thaddeus E. Ross. She prompted doctors to arrange a thorough examination of the patient when she noticed the abnormality.

Elizabeth Ross was meticulous when recording her medical observations, examining Banner from an observatory window, which was required for safety measures due to his radiation levels. During Bruce Banner's medical examination, doctors performed a bone density test, comparing Banner to the average adult's bone mineral density of same gender, race and age of peak bone mass, which was approximately age twenty-five to thirty. The result is a T-score: T-scores of -1 to +1 are considered normal bone density. Banner was recorded as having a T-score of +4, scoring much higher than the average man his age.

When Banner finally awoke, he demonstrated aggressive behavior, no longer recognizing himself or the situation he was in. Military records detail the patient demonstrating incredible strength, killing two hospital attendants that had tried to restrain him to his bed with his bare hands. It was reported the patient seemed confused and acted erratically.

Medical staff stated Banner was seen in the hallway after exiting his room, dragging a hospital attendant by his throat. There, directly in his path, stood Chief Nurse of the Military Corps, Elizabeth Ross. Appearing to be his next victim, medical staff reported that Elizabeth Ross stood there frozen in fear, her eyes tightly shut, as Banner approached. He stopped suddenly, leaning forward over her, while appearing to inspect Ross curiously.

Officers attempted to use tranquilizer darts on Banner, which had no affect, appearing only to aggravate him. However, instead of attacking, he uncharacteristically fled. He exited the building, dragging the hospital attendants lifeless body along, leaving Elizabeth Ross unharmed. The autopsy report done on the hospital attendant revealed Banner had snapped the man's neck, leaving him nearly decapitated, before releasing his corpse and disappearing into the desert barefoot.

Elizabeth Ross was later interviewed and asked to try and recollect the incident. She described his behavior as, "innocent, almost childlike", suggesting an absence of malevolent intent. It could not be determined what caused Banner's unusual reaction to Elizabeth Ross. In every other instance documented since waking, he has exhibited lethal aggression.

Military authorities made several attempts to retrieve the creature that was once Bruce Banner in the weeks and months that followed its infamous escape from the military base. The creature was difficult to track; it could be heard screaming in the night from miles away. Local hunters in the area reported hearing bellowing screams in the mountains, primarily at dusk, to the county police department. It was clear that what left the military base

infirmary that day was no longer Dr. Banner. It was a highly volatile creature that was growing in stature every time the military attempted to capture it.

The last recorded confrontation that S.H.I.E.L.D. had with the creature was when they tracked it to the mountains of Colorado, over four-hundred miles from the desert base located in New Mexico. Three teams, each equipped with heavy artillery, were deployed to survey the mountains by helicopter where the creature had been tracked. The helicopters had cameras affixed to them to record the encounter and observe the physical changes in Banner. The tracking teams were instructed to retrieve the creature, if possible. If that was not possible, they were instructed to terminate it on-site and retrieve the body for medical examination.

The footage depicted the team flying along a ridge in military formation, having located the target about one-hundred and sixty-five feet up on the cliffside. The creature is seen in the footage standing its ground, screaming at the approaching helicopters. It appeared to have startled one of the pilots, causing them to break formation. It was clear that the creature was notably larger than it had been in their last encounter. Footage captured the creature uprooting a forty-foot tree from the cliffside with ease and launching it into the side of the helicopter that veered from formation, sending it crashing into the mountain side. The tracking team in the following helicopter opened fire on the creature with a six-barrel mini gatling gun that was mounted to each helicopter. This type of arsenal could shoot a man in half. The footage shows the creature receiving a direct hit and being thrown back from the impact of the bullets. Capable of firing fifty rounds a second, three thousand rounds a minute, the destructive force of the weapon made it impossible to see anything after firing at the creature, as it stirred up dust and debris from the landscape, although it appeared the creature had been fatally hit.

The gatling gun could be heard spinning in the background of the video footage as the weapon ran out of ammunition. Command radioed the team, asking them to report the situation. As the dust began to settle, something could be seen moving through the cloud of debris. The creature was already up and running directly at the hovering helicopter. It jumped off the cliffside, estimated to be a one-hundred-and sixty-five-foot vertical drop. Footage captured by the following team showed the creature landing on the adjacent helicopter but being knocked off from the spinning propeller, sending it plummeting down the cliffside. The impact caused the pilot to lose control and crash into the side of the mountain. Command ordered the remaining team not to engage the target any further and to return back to base. Analysis of the footage from the encounter with the creature concluded that it was growing in size, mass, and strength, following every attempt to detain it.

In May of 1963, the newly appointed Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., Colonel Nicholas Joseph Fury, assumed command of the situation concerning his predecessor,

former Director Dr. Bruce Banner. Medical specialists that were familiar with the Enhancement Projects were brought in and briefed on Dr. Banner's condition. They were instructed to review his hospital records and give their expert opinion. After analyzing Banner's medical condition, they observed the encounter on the cliffside that was captured from the helicopter footage. They speculated that the potential cause of its increase in size and strength was the result of its adrenaline spiking. Colonel Fury, alongside several military authorities, determined that was the most logical explanation. The creature had only appeared to grow in size and strength following their attempts to detain it. It was decided that it was too dangerous to continue pursuing the creature or to make any further attempts to capture it by force. Instead, the team was ordered to gather intel on the creature and monitor it from a distance.

Tracking the creature proved extremely difficult. Even with additional precautions, it was extremely dangerous, as the creature was highly volatile and would lash out violently if it detected the slightest movement or sound in its presence. This led Colonel Fury to commission patented technology created by the late Dr. Anton Vanko. They employed the use of Dr. Vanko's silent drone technology due to the creature's territorial behavior. The drones were also used in an effort to alleviate the Agency's ever-growing concern of the creature becoming stronger. Dr. Vanko's silent aerial drones proved capable of tracking the creature. Analysis of the drone footage revealed a distinct silence in the forest when the creature was present. It was as though the animals, even the insects in the forest, could sense its territorial aggression and would avoid it or remain silent in its presence. It was clear that this unknown creature of ever-growing stature and strength had become the new apex predator, as it made its way deep into the mountainous regions of the forest.

The military had never observed anything in natural science that could produce something so unnatural. Unable to identify what Banner had become, he was described as a massive hulking corpse. The military's failed attempts to capture the creature became infamous within the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency. They fittingly named the Project: Hulk.

The Department of Defense requested that the Agency provide a higher level of security for projects than what had previously been demonstrated. The military's primary objective was to devise a plan to detain Banner, while continuing to rebuild the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency's original Human Enhancement Super Soldier Program, Project: Captain America.

Colonel Fury enlisted the expertise of Dr. Abraham Cornelius and Dr. Carol Hines, who were the leading experts in the field of Biomechanical Engineering. The pair were exceptionally brilliant and later adapted several of Dr. Anton Vanko's projects and research. Dr. Cornelius openly admitted he only rode the coattails of the late Dr. Vanko, modestly claiming he understood

just enough to be able to modify the equipment needed to develop the project. It wasn't known at the time, but that project would later become the most classified military project in American history, Project: Weapon X.

Norman flipped the page only to find that it was the last page of the document. He glanced up at the agent, who remained silent while patiently waiting for him to finish reading the briefing that he had prepared at the request of his Director, Colonel Nicholas Fury.

"That's it? What's Project: Weapon X?" asked Norman, confused.

Agent Dugan glanced up at him, seeing the intrigue in his eyes.

"Perhaps someday you'll have the clearance to read about it, Mr. Osborn."

Clearance? thought Norman, as he stared at the agent for a moment.

"For now, that's what I've been authorized to brief you on. Someone from the Agency will be in touch to give you the details regarding the meeting this Friday. It's being held at a military facility that's accessible by boat. You'll have the opportunity to meet with some of the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency's Genetics Division. I was informed you'll also be meeting with the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., Colonel Nicholas Fury. Colonel Fury has requested that Richard Parker be in attendance at the meeting. Please feel free to bring any other members from your team that you see fit," said the agent.

The request threw Norman off for a moment. He wondered why the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. would specifically request Richard Parker to be in attendance.

"Thank you for your time this morning, Mr. Osborn," the agent said, snapping Norman back to reality, as he reached out and shook his hand.

Norman's hands were clammy and cold. Nevertheless, he thanked the agent for the briefing as he opened the door to the boardroom and walked the agent down the hall to see him out.

"Be sure to notify me the moment you receive word from the Agency regarding the details of the upcoming meeting being held this Friday at their facility," Norman said to his secretary, as they walked past her desk.

"Ravencroft," the agent interjected. "That's the name of the facility."

Norman paced his office, analyzing the briefing that had just taken place. The agent's words were still lingering in his mind: "Perhaps someday you'll have the clearance to read about it, Mr. Osborn."

Clearance? Is that what I'd been granted?

He closed his eyes, exhaling deeply. The thought of everything was overwhelming.

Project: Weapon X… What could it be? Another Super Soldier?

Norman glanced out the window of his office only to see his reflection staring back. He scoffed at the sight of himself, almost nauseated at the thought of becoming involved in such things. Exhausted from it all, he suddenly felt an adrenaline dump now that the agent was gone and sat down at his desk.

Agent Dugan said that he had been assigned to Oscorp by the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., Colonel Nicholas Fury. Norman first learned of the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency several months ago during a meeting with a team of legal officers that were sent by the military to meet with him and his attorneys regarding Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography and NeoGenics Division. The military had proposed a contract expansion that would see the two divisions merge under Oscorp's Weapons Division contract that they currently had with the U.S. military.

Norman was informed that a Special Division of the Department of Defense called S.H.I.E.L.D. would be overseeing Oscorp's military contract going forward. They had recently requested that Norman and his team review and sign off on a non-disclosure confidentiality agreement. They also requested to integrate their software with Oscorp's computer mainframe which contains all the company's data. The saved copies of Oscorp's files would be sent directly to S.H.I.E.L.D.'s central hub, granting them a window into Oscorp. This would give the military scientists at S.H.I.E.L.D. the ability to observe the research being conducted at Oscorp and provide them with the opportunity to analyze the data themselves.

The S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency required Oscorp's security be upgraded since being integrated with their computer mainframe. Norman still wasn't sure he'd made the right decision and felt rather uncertain granting the Agency that much access to Oscorp. He realized that anyone connected to these Enhancement Projects met an ill fate.

I suppose karma's unforgiving when you're trying to genetically alter God's creation for the purpose of war, he thought, cynically.

Norman wasn't a religious man by any means but had to wonder if there was something more to it considering the military's track record with these Enhancement Projects. Prior to the S.H.I.E.L.D. briefing, Norman had no idea that Howard Stark had been involved with the military. It had not been publicly disclosed that he was the first Director of the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency. He was widely known for being a philanthropist and the CEO of Stark Industries. He was also someone Norman's father highly respected. Despite the fact it was said that Howard Stark used his company to fund the Second World War, supplying the U.S. military with weapons and ammunition.

Perhaps it was to prolong the research they were conducting on the Super Soldier Serum that James Barnes managed to smuggle out of Germany, thought Norman, staring off as his eyes blurred out of focus.

Howard Stark was the CEO of Stark industries during the development of S.H.I.E.L.D. He was contracted to manufacture weapons as a third-party supplier for the U.S. military, similarly to Oscorp. Although, his involvement with the military and their projects grew widely out of his control, ultimately costing him his life. Stark had become so immersed in the war; he became the victim of his own doing.

A frightening scenario it must have been, as James Barnes approached with his weapon drawn. I wonder if Stark realized just before death, that it was under his command that Barnes was sent to Germany to infiltrate the Hydra Regime, thought Norman, as he sat there recounting the details of the briefing, trying to ignore the eerie similarities he shared with the former S.H.I.E.L.D. Director.

He got up and poured himself a drink. It wasn't even noon yet, but his mouth was dry, and whisky seemed appropriate considering the circumstance. He sat back down at his desk recollecting the file and horrific photo images of the red skeleton-faced madman that started it all. Norman couldn't help being fascinated by Johann Shmidt's story.

Driven to the point of madness. There were no boundaries or limits to what he would do to attain perfection. No regard for anyone's life, including his own; and by his own hand, he became the embodiment of living death, thought Norman.

He closed his eyes, thinking back on the classified document being slid across the table. The red bold letters, Project: Captain America. He shuddered with a chill; the thought of it all left him staring blankly out the window, watching the water droplets collect and slowly trickle down the glass on that rainy Monday morning.

Norman was no stranger to the military; he served for four years before inheriting the family company, as did his father before him. However, he had never had a briefing regarding a classified project, nor had he ever

been part of one. The military's involvement with Oscorp had been steadily increasing this year as they seemed to take great interest in Oscorp's NeoGenics research.

Norman wasn't sure how he felt about this new rapport with the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency. He was used to calling the shots and preferred it that way. He was meeting with the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. this coming Friday at Ravencroft, which would be their first time meeting. Agent Dugan informed Norman that he had been assigned with briefing him on some of the military's past projects by his Director, Colonel Nicholas Fury. He explained that the meeting at Ravencroft would be to discuss some of the projects Oscorp was currently working on that the Agency had interest in developing further.

Norman knew going forward, that due to the new contract merger, the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency would now be primarily dictating the direction of the NeoGenics research at Oscorp. Nevertheless, his fascination with the projects clouded his better judgement and he reluctantly agreed. Along with Oscorp's funding from the military came a growing reputation in the scientific community. Norman found himself being invited to prestigious events where only the most influential people in New York came together. Most were state politicians and wealthy corporate figures, as well as prominent elites that collectively governed the state behind the scenes. Some he knew well; others were only now recognizing Oscorp's achievements in the scientific community.

Norman came from an elite family that had a long industrial history operating in the state of New York. Norman's great-great grandfather founded Oscorp Industries in 1832, specializing in the making of major industrial chemicals such as phosgene and chlorine. Phosgene, which was initially used by the company to make plastics and pesticides for farms, would later be known by its military designation, "CG". It was well known in the industry that phosgene at 70 degrees Fahrenheit (room temperature) was a poisonous gas. However, they discovered that with cooling and pressure, phosgene gas can be converted into a liquid, so it could be stored and shipped. When liquid phosgene is released, it quickly turns into a pale-yellow gas that stays low to the ground and spreads rapidly. Oscorp had been contracted by the U.S. military since 1917, during the First World War, making them the first private corporation in history to be contracted as a third-party supplier to produce Chemical Weapons for the United States military. Phosgene was used extensively in the First World War as a choking pulmonary agent, which was the cause of many deaths.

Oscorp Industries has remained under contract with the military since his grandfather ran the company, which was developed into Oscorp's Weapons Division. However, the company's most recent notoriety came in the field of genetics. A year ago, a geneticist at Oscorp named Richard Parker

successfully sequenced the human genome with arachnid DNA that was edited from three different species of spiders to genetically engineer a unique species possessing specific traits from each of the species.

The genetically engineered species of arachnid was extremely intelligent, displaying high levels of adaptability. It exhibited strategic problem-solving skills that were more commonly seen in birds, mammals, and sea creatures. The Scientific Journal proclaimed the research to be groundbreaking, catapulting Oscorp to the forefront of genetic research and development.

Richard Parker received the Nobel Prize for his accomplishment, while the Academy of Science fittingly named his research NeoGenics. However, the research was far beyond scientific comprehension at the time and was highly criticized. Religious organizations slammed Oscorp, claiming the corporation was playing God, and argued that the practice should be illegal, while corporate organizations such as the pharmaceutical industry were in full support of the research.

That's for the politicians to debate, thought Norman.

Politics can be a tricky thing in the state of New York; most times things aren't always as they seem. Norman was entering unknown territory; this wasn't like the Weapons Division contract, which Norman inherited with the company. He had no prior experience beyond being a third-party supplier for the military. What was significantly different about this contract merger was that S.H.I.E.L.D. would now be directly involved with Oscorp's operation. This contract merger meant that Oscorp would now be working in direct correlation with the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency.

Norman gathered himself; he felt restless and decided to head down to the laboratory to inform Dr. Parker of the meeting they were invited to attend at Ravencroft. Norman wanted to gauge Richard's reaction to the invitation and instill confidence in the future promise of his research in NeoGenics. Norman knew all too well that Richard Parker was a man that held firm to his own ideals and had to be handled with consideration.

When Oscorp made the acquisition of Trask Industries over a decade ago, it was done specifically to acquire Richard Parker's research in NeoGenics. However, when offered a contract to continue his research at Oscorp along with a substantial salary increase and the position of Chief Geneticist, Parker would only agree to come on board if his two lab associates were made part of his new contract. Norman initially thought it was a bold move and refused Parker's request. When Norman received word that Richard had declined the offer to come work for Oscorp, he was not pleased. No one had ever refused to work for the company, and Richard's previous salary paled in comparison to what Norman had offered him. This proved to be challenging; Norman had grown accustomed to getting what he

wanted and was frustrated by the setback. However, Norman was a businessman, and after another attempt at negotiating, Parker got everything he wanted and eventually accepted the offer. Since then, Norman found his relationship with Parker had been strained to some degree, never able to gain Richard's confidence following their arduous beginning. Norman was still young in his career and viewed Parker's boldness as a challenge. However, he became more concerned with Oscorp's reputation being tarnished by the geneticist refusing the company's offer and going to work for the competition. Therefore, he reluctantly agreed to Parker's request, adding his lab assistants Mary Parker and Curt Conners to his contract. Norman found Richard's apprehension to the offer concerning; to try and rectify things he gave him full run of the genetics laboratory at Oscorp in an attempt to make amends.

Norman rarely visited the laboratory, finding that Richard had a way about him that sometimes irritated him. He was unconforming, showing no interest in attending corporate meetings. Richard appointed Mary Parker as the Head of the Division instead, in which she provided the analytical metrics and attended to the corporate requirements. Richard's focus remained on his projects with his partner, Dr. Curt Conners. This had been a troubling thought that concerned Norman when it came to dealing with Parker. Especially since he had his breakthrough achievement, creating the genetically engineered species of spider.

How will Parker view the military's involvement with Oscorp's research in NeoGenics? he wondered.

Norman notified his secretary that he was leaving for lunch shortly and asked her to reschedule his remaining meetings for the week. He needed to think of a game plan to get Parker on board without compromising their new working relationship with S.H.I.E.L.D. The security lock sounded as the door to his office shut. The smell of whisky still lingered on his breath as he made his way down the hallway corridor to the elevator.

I haven't been to the lab in some time, he thought, as the elevator door closed.

Still feeling somewhat anxious from the briefing earlier, he tried to slow his mind and collect his thoughts. He listened to the soft chime of each floor that passed as he closed his eyes, taking several deep breaths. The elevator doorbell sounded; he opened his eyes and proceeded down the hallway. He walked towards the laboratory where he could see Richard Parker hunched over a microscope. Norman entered the lab, casually nodding to acknowledge the laboratory technician that was sitting at the computer, who appeared caught off guard.

"Good morning, Mr. Osborn," the laboratory technician said, hesitantly.

Norman had already walked past him and was too lost in his own thoughts to hear the young man. Dr. Parker's back was turned, hunched over the microscope, unaware of Norman approaching.

"Good morning, Richard," he said, greeting him politely.

Richard lifted his head and turned to see Norman walking toward him with his hand outstretched.

"Good morning, Mr. Osborn. What brings you to these parts?" asked Richard, as he stood up and shook Norman's hand.

Norman was direct and to the point, as usual.

"I wanted to come down here personally to let you know of the meeting we've been invited to attend this coming Friday. They're going to have some of the industry's leading geneticists in attendance," Norman said, trying to entice Richard's curiosity.

"Is that right? Sounds interesting," said Richard, tentatively.

"From what I was told, we'll have to travel by boat to get to the facility. It'll be an interesting experience for us both," said Norman.

Richard hesitantly replied, "Mr. Osborn, I'd prefer to stay behind if it's all the same. I have a ton of research still pending, and I tend to get seasick quite easily."

Richard had a casual, almost dismissive way about him that Norman was quite frankly not accustomed to. It had been Norman's experience that those that worked for the company usually exhibited a subservient manner in his presence. Norman was the CEO of Oscorp Industries, and the title commanded a certain level of respect. However, the quirky geneticist always came off as rather indifferent to Norman.

"It's not a request, Parker," said Norman, catching himself before continuing.

He softened his tone, attempting to be more persuasive and play to Dr. Parker's expertise in the field of genetics.

"I need my chief geneticist present. Am I supposed to answer their questions should they ask something regarding your research?" said Norman.

Richard sighed and reluctantly agreed to attend the meeting, somewhat curious as to what other geneticists in the country had been working on. Norman requested that Richard put a presentation together detailing the research that was conducted on the spiders that he had genetically engineered. Richard was hesitant about the request, asking Norman what company they were meeting with and who the team of geneticists were.

Norman knew he couldn't lie to Parker but wasn't willing to disclose any details regarding S.H.I.E.L.D. or where Oscorp's new relationship with the Agency would take their future research in NeoGenics. Unprepared for the question, he reassured Dr. Parker that they would discuss the details in the coming days. Norman scheduled some one-on-one time with Richard to go over the presentation Thursday morning. This gave them only three days to prepare for the upcoming meeting at Ravencroft.

Norman knew rightly that S.H.I.E.L.D. had already gathered enough of Oscorp's NeoGenics research. This presentation was merely for the sake of formalities and Richard Parker's introduction to the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency's team of geneticists. Norman was meeting the team for the first time as well, making him feel somewhat uneasy. Bringing Parker along before he had the opportunity to properly communicate with the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency on what would be disclosed felt like it could be a mistake. Norman was certain that if Parker had been present during the briefing with Agent Dugan, he would indefinitely walk away from the NeoGenics project.

Parker doesn't have the stomach for that sort of thing, he thought.

Norman questioned whether he had the stomach for it after receiving the briefing. Seeing the horrific photos taken from Project: Red Skull of Johann Shmidt lying in that hospital bed was an image he would not soon forget. Norman shuddered as he walked down the hall. He opened the door and switched the lights on to the boardroom, which could also be accessed through his office by retinal scan following the security upgrades that had been implemented by the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency. He entered the board room through the main entrance which was used by staff members when attending the company's department meetings. He tapped his access card on the panel and looked into the retinal scanner on the wall as the door to his office sounded. He opened the door, walked over to the liquor cabinet, poured himself a glass of whiskey, and collected his things. He pressed the phone line to his secretary and asked her to have the car ready out front; he was leaving for lunch.

He was eager to review the presentation he requested Dr. Parker to put together for the meeting. Norman recognized the unparalleled brilliance that Richard Parker possessed on the subject of genetics and realized why the military had shown such interest in his research. It was incomprehensible what he had achieved, and the scientific community had been buzzing about his research ever since.

Richard found success through gene editing and splicing, a term used to refer to the process by which the DNA of an organism is cut, and a gene from another organism is inserted. He was able to splice the genes of three different species of arachnids, while successfully editing and sequencing the DNA with the human genome. He genetically engineered a completely new

species of spider that contained genetic properties of all three spiders while possessing code from the human genome.

However, Richard wasn't able to replicate the results of the first successful experiment due to the complexities of the process, which would sporadically place unwanted inherited genetic markers together during the sequencing phase. A genetic marker is a DNA sequence with a known physical location on a chromosome. Genetic markers can help link an inherited disease with the responsible gene. DNA segments close to each other on a chromosome tend to be inherited together, making it extremely difficult to replicate the genetic code of a specific DNA sequence.

Fortunately, Dr. Parker had the foresight to create a suitable habitat for the new species of spider in order to conduct his research on them. He and the team created a large terrarium in order to simulate a natural environment for the new species. This inadvertently gave the spiders the opportunity to breed, making it possible to continue his research on the species.

Norman sat in the large boardroom waiting for Richard to arrive on Thursday morning to review the presentation. He had planned to discuss the upcoming meeting in which he hoped he could gain Parker's confidence. Norman knew what was at stake and had to sell Parker on Oscorp's new partnership with the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency. Richard entered the boardroom with his laptop under his arm and coffee in his hand, looking rather tired.

"Good morning, Richard," Norman said, getting up to turn the overhead projector on as Richard set his laptop and coffee on the boardroom table.

"Good morning, Mr. Osborn," said Richard, as he got right to it, opening his laptop and hooking it up to the projector.

Richard had created a detailed presentation for the team at Oscorp last year after his breakthrough. He decided to use it for the presentation but cut it down significantly for time. He also didn't want to reveal too much of his research before knowing who it was they were working with.

"Shall we begin, Mr. Osborn?" asked Richard, opening the first slide, as he took his seat across from Norman at the boardroom table.

"Before we get started, I mentioned the other day when we spoke in the lab that I would touch on who we're meeting with on Friday," said Norman, pressing the tips of his fingers together as he prepared to try and play to Richard's moral ethics.

Norman knew Richard all too well and decided that he would try and convince him of the good they could do with the military financing Oscorp's research.

“Oscorp has an opportunity to work hand in hand with a division of the government in what could be the most cutting-edge genetics research in the country. This could revolutionize modern day medicine through genetics and advance humanity from the research that’s being conducted. I want Oscorp to be part of that vision that advances our medical system and leads us into a new era of science. I think with the funding that’s being offered, we can do amazing things together in the future,” said Norman.

“Pardon my ignorance, Mr. Osborn. What part of the government will Oscorp be working with exactly?” asked Richard.

Norman realized he needed to cut the charade; he wasn’t going to be able to pull the wool over Parker’s eyes. He figured it was best to just come out with it rather than insult Richard’s intelligence.

“We’ll be working together with a division of the Department of Defense,” said Norman, plainly.

Richard paused for a moment, as if taken aback by Norman’s directness. Norman studied him closely, wondering if he had made the right decision by being so forthright.

“When you say together, are you implying that my research in NeoGenics is going to be sold to the military?” asked Richard, bluntly.

“Oscorp has been offered to expand the existing Weapons Division contract that we have with the military. This would not only see the contract expansion include Oscorp’s NeoGenics Division but would also include Oscorp’s Institution of Oceanography. I requested you be at this meeting because I want you to represent Oscorp’s NeoGenics Division when we begin working with the team at Ravencroft. I respect that this is your research, Richard. That’s why I asked you to come to this meeting: you’re Oscorp’s Chief Geneticist,” said Norman, trying to imply that it was him that requested Richard be at the meeting.

Richard sat silently, taking in what Norman was saying as he continued.

“When the government proposed the contract expansion, I weighed things out and realized that they were going to study NeoGenics with or without us. I’d rather be involved; this is something that was developed at Oscorp. I believe we should use this as an opportunity to take your research in NeoGenics to the next level. I can assure you, Richard, you will have full command of the laboratory. You’re the head of the division; that will not change,” said Norman.

Richard was somewhat surprised by how straightforward Mr. Osborn was being with him as he considered what was being said.

“Did they say what they plan on using my research for?” asked

Richard, directly.

Norman paused for a moment before replying, choosing his words carefully.

"From what I understand, their interest in NeoGenics research is for medical advancement. Now what that means exactly, I really can't say for certain. I won't pretend to know all the details, but the study of gene editing and genetic splicing could provide us with the ability to replace unwanted hereditary genes that could be cancerous with a healthy functional version, which would be groundbreaking. I can say this, Richard, I believe the meeting I had with them was a step in the right direction for Oscorp's research in NeoGenics," said Norman, confidently.

"Alright, let's see what they propose at this meeting tomorrow," said Richard, guardedly.

"Excellent! I'm grateful to have your expertise on this venture, Richard," said Norman.

"Shall we begin reviewing the presentation?" asked Richard.

"Certainly, let's get started," said Norman.

He listened as Richard meticulously outlined the main points of each slide. Norman acknowledged the genius required to do something as profound as splice and sequence the human genome with the DNA of three separate species of spiders to genetically engineer a completely unique species. The fact that Richard Parker was capable of splicing genes from different samples of DNA to create a genetic sequence resulting in an entirely new species was revolutionary and groundbreaking. This was the kind of thing Norman used to read about in his science fiction novels when he was a boy, never imagining that it was possible. Richard Parker was able to do something that no one else had, catapulting Oscorp to the top of the scientific community in the field of genetics.

Richard went over the details of the data he documented while conducting his analysis, as Norman thought back to his meeting with Agent Dugan. After receiving the briefing earlier in the week, it became evident to him why the military was interested in Parker's research. Richard finished going over the presentation as Norman leaned forward and switched off the projector.

"That was excellent, Richard. Thank you for putting that together," said Norman.

Richard nodded as he closed his laptop and sat back down across from Norman.

"Your work on the NeoGenics project has been nothing short of a miracle. Here's the invitation to the meeting. In it, you'll find the directions to

the boat pier. We'll be leaving at 7am," said Norman, handing Richard an envelope.

"Thank you," said Richard, as he reached across the table.

"I'm told this is a state-of-the-art facility with all the bells and whistles. One way on the island, one way off. I'm looking forward to meeting their team. I'll see you at the pier tomorrow morning," said Norman.

"Likewise. See you tomorrow, Mr. Osborn," said Richard, as he stood up and collected his laptop before leaving the boardroom.

Norman saw Richard out, then made his way back through the boardroom. He tapped his access card on the panel and looked into the retinal scanner on the wall as the door to his office sounded. He walked over to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a glass of whiskey.

That went better than I expected. Getting Parker on board was half the battle, now I just have to get through this meeting with S.H.I.E.L.D. tomorrow and hope they don't reveal anything that'll spook Parker off the NeoGenics project, thought Norman, as he shot back his whiskey, immediately pouring himself another.

He was scheduled to meet for a one-on-one first thing tomorrow morning with the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., Colonel Nicholas Fury, and wasn't sure what to expect. It was a rare occurrence when Norman felt intimidated, but this was one of those instances. He sipped his whiskey as he sat at his desk in thought. Leaning back in his chair, he stared at the ceiling wondering if he may have gotten himself in over his head.

Norman had displayed exceptional management of the enterprise. He strategically led the organization, taking Oscorp Industries to the next level as an international corporation following his service in the military. Norman's father would often say that he reminded him of his late grandfather who took the company in a completely different direction, creating Oscorp's Weapons Division in 1917. His grandfather was a gregarious man that had a sharp wit and sharper tongue, well known in the community for his brashness and political affiliations. Norman idolized his grandfather and the stories his father would tell him. His grandfather took Oscorp from a small industrial company to the first North American corporation to supply the United States military with chemical weapons.

Norman finally realized how alike they were, now understanding the weight of the decision his grandfather had to make. He took their small family business that initially produced phosgene and chlorine to make plastic and pesticides for farmers and turned it into a multi million-dollar corporation, making Oscorp a third-party supplier for the United States military. Although, he wanted to believe his grandfather hadn't foreseen how the military would use their product during the war.

Unfortunately, you're not a naïve kid anymore, thought Norman, as he shot back the remaining whiskey in his glass.

The thought reminded him that he still needed to inform his son, Harry, that he had a meeting tomorrow. Harry attended Oscorp's Institution of Academic Excellence and had a personal escort that drove him to and from school. Richard's son, Peter, also attended Oscorp's Institution of Academic Excellence. The Academy was established by Norman's grandfather in 1904. It was a private educational institution that operated out of Oscorp Industries. The Academy was widely regarded as one of the oldest and most prestigious private schools in New York City. Norman's grandfather was concerned that his son would not be educated to standard, claiming that academia was declining in the United States. This led him to create his own academic faculty, employing the brightest in the fields of science, mathematics and mechanical engineering, to ensure that his family's heritage would remain superior in the industry. The curriculum included both theoretical lectures and practical lab sessions. While assessment methods would vary, they typically included written exams, lab reports, project work, and presentations. The programs also featured group projects, providing hands-on experience and the opportunity to apply learned concepts to real-world challenges. It had a fantastic curriculum that was put together by a faculty of brilliant professors, making it one of the top-rated schools in the country.

Norman had heard stories from his father regarding his grandfather being extremely militant, having incredibly high expectations of him. Norman was constantly reminded of how easy he had it compared to what his father was expected to achieve.

It seems the expectations have somewhat diminished over the years, Norman reflected, disappointedly.

Harry was a good kid, but simply put, he didn't have the drive, nor the intelligence required to run a company of Oscorp's magnitude. Richard's son, Peter, on the other hand was at the top of his class, being exceptionally bright. He would join Richard in the laboratory every day after school, already rivaling the level of a teacher's assistant and was well on his way to a career in genetics.

Harry has yet to exhibit the level of intelligence that Parker's boy has demonstrated. Albeit, he's had it hard, thought Norman.

Norman's wife died while giving birth to Harry fifteen years ago, leaving Norman to raise Harry alone. Norman found it difficult to cope with the loss of his wife and began drinking heavily as a result. He used alcohol as a crutch and went through life avoiding things that reminded him of her. That unfortunately meant that he avoided his responsibility as a father for the most part, leaving the care of his son in the hands of hired help. Norman prioritized the company and submerged himself in his work as much as

possible to avoid facing the harsh reality. Norman was aware he hadn't been a good father, and the thought made it even harder for him to face his responsibilities. Norman's father had always handled everything with such poise, never showing the slightest weakness.

It's unfair, thought Norman, as he rubbed the back of his neck, feeling somewhat emotional from the sudden wave of thoughts.

Pull yourself together. Now's not the time.

Norman suddenly had a thought; he realized that if he introduced the boys he could use them to get closer to Richard. Being the heir to Oscorp, Harry didn't have many friends at the Academy. Norman decided to arrange something recreational for them to do after school while they waited for him and Richard to return from the meeting tomorrow.

The boys were acquainted with one another but weren't friends as far as Norman was aware. Parker's son was in the most advanced curriculum that the Academy provided, while Harry had not met the curriculum's requirements. Norman instead chose to enroll Harry in a business development program he had specifically put together to prepare him for his future inheritance of the company. Harry was a couple years older than Richard's son, but Norman felt that this was the perfect opportunity to find common ground with Parker.

Being around someone like Parker's son might even influence Harry in a positive way, he thought, as he gathered his things.

He pressed the extension line to his secretary and requested that she arrange an after-school Festivities Event in Oscorp's Grand Hall for the students tomorrow.

"Draft a brief letter summarizing the Festivities Event and inform the students that they must have it signed by their legal guardian to attend the event. Set it up like we would a small business event, call the chefs in with a few servers. I realize it's last minute, but would you be able to oversee the event tomorrow evening until Dr. Parker and I get back from the meeting at Ravencroft?" asked Norman.

"Certainly, Mr. Osborn," said the young secretary.

"Thank you, Felicia," said Norman, as he ended the call.

The Grand Hall was typically used for hosting company events, such as the annual Christmas party and Oscorp's charity banquet. Over the years the company had utilized the Grand Hall for an assortment of business functions, having a ten-lane bowling alley, a gym, an indoor pool and sauna, a billiards hall, and its own private restaurant. It even had a built-in theater, having acquired an extensive selection of films over the years for guests to choose from. The theater had everything from buttered popcorn to a variety

of different candies and chocolates.

The Grand Hall was often used to entertain clients that were conducting business with the company from overseas. Rather than renting out lavish hotels to host business conferences, everything could be conveniently conducted on-site at Oscorp. The Grand Hall had two floors consisting of several guest suites and a single master suite that could comfortably accommodate business associates that were flying in from abroad. The Grand Hall had everything from a bar and lounge area consisting of pool tables and dart boards, to a banquet hall capable of seating approximately five hundred people.

Norman had his wedding reception at Oscorp in the Grand Hall. His entire bridal party had stayed in the guest suites, while he and his wife stayed in the master suite that night and left for Maui the following morning for their honeymoon.

A better time, thought Norman, staring off, catching himself reminiscing again.

There's so much riding on this meeting tomorrow, this is no time to be emotional, he thought, annoyed with himself.

He gathered his things, closed the door to his office, and made his way down the office corridor to the Grand Foyer.

"Your car is ready, Mr. Osborn," said the young secretary, attentively.

"Thank you, Miss Hardy," said Norman.

He set his briefcase on the conveyor and walked through the advanced imaging scanner at the security gate. Oscorp followed a strict security protocol, having a military-grade security program in place since Norman's grandfather developed the Weapons Division in 1917. However, since the contract merger was implemented to include the Institution of Oceanography and NeoGenics Division, the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency had insisted that security be increased at Oscorp, requiring a full screening upon entry and exiting the facility. The upgrade was recently implemented a few months ago when the contract merger had been finalized.

Norman realized the importance of securing Oscorp's research, but they already had a rigorous security process that was a military-grade medium-level security facility. Having four levels of security: physical, network, application, and data, that formed a comprehensive defense against a myriad of threats. However, Oscorp's medium-level security system would not suffice for the S.H.I.E.L.D. Director. Colonel Fury insisted the facility be upgraded to a high-level security system. This was one of many changes that Norman reluctantly agreed to when he signed the new military contract, merging Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography and NeoGenics Division under

the existing Weapons Division contract that was now being overseen by the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency.

Although, after receiving the briefing from Agent Dugan, Norman understood the S.H.I.E.L.D. Director's reasons for caution. He exited the screening, picked his briefcase up off the conveyor, and proceeded towards the exit as the head of security, an elderly man named Mr. Berkley, greeted him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Osborn," he said, with a kind smile.

Norman had known Mr. Berkley since he was a boy. Having been hired by Norman's father, Mr. Berkley had been with the company for thirty-eight years.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Berkley. If anyone should ask, tell them I left for the day, will you? I'm going to lunch and won't be returning this afternoon," said Norman.

"Certainly, sir," said Mr. Berkley.

Norman walked towards the valet attendant as he opened the door to the black Rolls Royce.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Osborn," said the valet attendant.

Norman nodded his head to the young man, "good afternoon," he said, as he got in the vehicle, immediately pouring himself another whiskey.

"Where to, sir?" asked the elderly driver.

"Take me home, Bernard," said Norman.

This had been an exhausting week; he needed to reset and clear his mind. He was feeling overwhelmed from the thought of the contract merger and knowing the military could potentially be using Oscorp's research to assist in further developing the projects he was briefed on by the Agency.

I need to be sharp tomorrow when I meet with the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency's Director, Colonel Nicholas Fury. I have to ensure the future of Oscorp doesn't fall into the hands of some government agency looking for a place to conduct their science experiments, he thought, as he sipped his whiskey, watching the rain drops trickle down the window of the Rolls Royce.

Richard Parker

Richard woke to the sound of his alarm quietly buzzing. He rolled over and pressed the alarm button as his wife, Mary, stretched out and rubbed her eyes tiredly.

"Making us get up at 5am on a Friday just because you have a meeting on some remote Jekyll Island isn't right, Richard," she said, half serious, as she pushed the covers off with her feet.

"Go get Peter up," she said, as she tied her house coat up, "I'll get breakfast started."

Richard was tired as well; he hardly slept knowing he would be traveling by boat this morning.

That and being stuck with Norman Osborn all day, he thought, rather miserably, as he walked down the hall still feeling half asleep.

He knocked gently on his son's door.

"Peter," he said quietly as he cracked the door open. "Wake up, buddy. Go have some breakfast."

Peter rolled over, squinting as Richard turned the light on to his bedroom.

"Okay, Dad, I'm up," he said, as he stretched out and yawned.

Peter had no trouble getting up. He was rather excited this morning. He had received a permission letter from school yesterday informing parents that they would be having a Festivities Event for the students after school today in the Grand Hall until 7pm. Peter had been to the Grand Hall a number of times for the company's annual Christmas Party, but never without his parents. Peter always appreciated seeing the massive statues and other historic artifacts that decorated the Grand Hall.

Peter was in his eighth year at Oscorp's Institution of Academic Excellence and had the second highest GPA in his class, next to Gwendolyne Stacy. She was the daughter of the Police Chief of New York City, George Stacy. Peter always looked forward to the company Christmas party each year because Gwen would be there and they would get to hang out. Last year, during the Christmas party, Peter watched a movie with Gwen in the Grand Hall theater. She spoke of her father, revealing that he had been educated at Oscorp with Norman Osborn and that they had been best friends ever since they were children. Gwen had been enrolled at Oscorp's Institution of Academic Excellence since she was four years old, starting the same year as Peter. She was quite brilliant and was studying to become a Marine

Mechanical Engineer. She was working on getting into Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography's Marine Engineering Program to do her internship under Dr. Reed Richards, Oscorp's Chief Naval Architect and Engineer.

Over the years while working at Oscorp, Richard Parker had become good friends with Dr. Reed Richards. Peter had boasted to Gwen about having been to Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography on several occasions. The Marine Engineering Program that Dr. Reed Richards and Dr. Victor Vondume put together at Oscorp was a renown, highly advanced program. Marine mechanical engineering is a specialized field of engineering that applies mechanical engineering principles to the design, operation, and maintenance of watercraft, particularly ships and submarines.

Upon completion of their studies, the student can begin teaching as an assistant at Oscorp's Institution of Academic Excellence, which typically consist of lectures and seminars, with compulsory introductory courses covered during the first part of their degree. As students progress in their program, they have the opportunity to select specializations in Marine Sciences and Oceanography.

It was a highly advanced program that excited Peter. He was hoping he would get the chance to talk with Gwen about it at the Festivities Event after school today. Liz and Betty were going too; that being the case, Peter knew it would be difficult to talk with Gwen about their program specializations for next year. That wasn't his only obstacle; on the ride home from school yesterday, Richard asked Peter if he wouldn't mind spending some time with Norman's son, Harry, during the Festivities Event. Harry was also going to be at the Festivities Event, waiting for his father to return from the meeting at Ravencroft. Peter had met Harry a few times before, recalling him to be a quiet boy who rarely ever said anything. He agreed, not thinking much of it, other than Harry likely wouldn't want to hang out due to being two years older than Peter and his friends. Harry was fifteen and was in a separate curriculum than Peter and his friends. Nevertheless, Peter agreed, almost certain that Harry wouldn't want to fraternize with him and the girls.

Richard made his way downstairs to the kitchen and poured himself a cup of freshly made coffee.

"Your breakfast is on the table, Richard," Mary said, as she sat there eating her eggs with a piece of buttered toast.

"Thank you, love," he said, as he sat down and opened the Daily Bugle Newspaper.

"Another rooftop murder! Police aren't saying if it's linked to the others, but there's got to be a connection. This must be the fifth report of a rooftop murder that's been in the newspaper headlines this year," said Richard, as he read through the article.

“The media always go with the stories that have the most shock value. They never print any of the inner-city issues we’re facing due to obvious political corruption. They’d rather keep people distracted with murders and serial killer stories,” she scoffed, with a certain distaste for the Daily Bugle newspaper.

“I got a call from Reed at the lab yesterday. He mentioned they were doing a private launch ceremony in the Oceanography auditorium for their deep-sea expedition into the Mariana Trench. The launch is scheduled for next week, Monday morning. He invited us to go down to the auditorium to watch them from the big screen like last time,” said Richard.

“What’s so special about this launch ceremony compared to the last one that we would need to be there again?” she asked, still chewing her eggs and toast.

“Mary, his team won the Award for Ocean Exploration for that expedition. He was there to support us when we won our award. Not to mention, Peter has been going on and on about the research article Reed recently wrote that was published in the Scientific Times on their last expedition into the Mariana Trench. Reed had mentioned after receiving the award that they were making upgrades to the submersible vessel. He wouldn’t go into details, but he said they were using the most sophisticated state-of-the-art technology that he’d ever seen,” said Richard.

Peter made his way downstairs, setting his backpack down on the bench by the door, drawing Mary’s attention away from the conversation she was having with her husband.

“Peter, come eat before your eggs get cold,” said Mary, impatiently.

She was a mother first and foremost and ran everything when it came to the Parker residence. Richard was a genius, but it was Mary Parker who managed their household, as well as the laboratory at Oscorp, which she considered a family practice.

Peter, being educated at Oscorp’s Institution of Academic Excellence, would go to the laboratory every day after finishing his classes at 3pm and would continue his education as his father’s lab assistant. Peter was extremely intelligent, having been instructed by Richard from a young age and was quite comfortable navigating around the laboratory.

Peter came into the kitchen and sat down at the table.

“Are you excited for tonight's Festivities in the Grand Hall?“ asked Mary.

“Yeah, it should be fun,” said Peter, as he chewed his food.

“Is Gwen going to be there too?” asked Mary, cheekily.

Richard glanced up with a smirk as he flipped the page and took a sip of his coffee.

“I’m pretty sure all the students are going, Mom,” said Peter, who was slightly annoyed but couldn’t help blushing from the question.

”What time are you going to be back from the meeting today, Dad?" asked Peter.

“I’m not sure. I don’t know how long the ferry ride will take. I can’t see us being any later than 7pm. Thank you, darling; that hit the spot,” said Richard, gathering his plate and coffee cup as he walked over to the sink and rinsed his dish before placing it in the dishwasher.

“Let’s get ready. It’s raining again, and I don’t want you to be late for the ferry this morning,” said Mary, before taking the last sip of her coffee.

As they gathered their things, Mary noticed that Richard was a bit out of sorts. She knew her husband well and could tell that something was off.

“Not looking forward to the boat ride with Captain Serious this morning?” she asked, trying to ease the tension that she could sense in him.

He smiled and put his arm around her, pulling her in for a hug, and kissed her forehead. Mary was a tiny woman, standing at 5’1”, making Richard feel like a giant standing next to her. Something Richard appreciated, being 5’6”.

“I don’t know… I guess I’m not a huge fan of the water or Captain Serious. I’m certainly not a fan of who I’m presenting my research to this morning. I didn’t get much out of Norman leading up to this meeting, but I got enough to feel skeptical,” said Richard.

“Well, try not to worry. It’s probably just a Board of Directors with a team of geneticists waving boatloads of money to swindle Oscorp for your research,” said Mary, cynically.

“It’s scary, but you’re probably right on the mark with that. You always know how to cheer me up,” he said, sarcastically.

“I do try,” she said, with a quick pat on his behind, as she called upstairs.

“Peter, hurry up and get your things together. We’ll be in the car waiting.”

Peter had his favorite outfit packed for the after-school Festivities Event, along with the research article that Dr. Reed Richards published on his team’s dive into the Mariana Trench. He was looking forward to hearing Gwen’s thoughts on it, bringing it just in case she hadn’t read it yet.

Dr. Reed Richards and Dr. Victor Vondume built a submersible vessel together that took them to depths that had never been recorded. This brought notoriety, new contract offers, and funding for Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography. They revolutionized and propelled deep-sea exploration forward. The submersible vessel reached a record-breaking depth of ten-thousand-nine-hundred meters, which was over six and half miles deep in the Mariana Trench.

This won them the Award for Ocean Exploration, with The Scientific Times magazine dubbing the team, The Fantastic Four. The achievement was followed by an expansion offer from the military to merge the Institution of Oceanography under Oscorp's existing Weapons Division contract, which included additional funding.

The upgrades to the submersible vessel had not yet been disclosed and were made possible by enhancements that were financed by the military. The submersible vessel had been upgraded utilizing a rare metal called vibranium along with Arc technology. The upgrade to vibranium included the vessel's hull, manipulator arm, and variable ballast spheres, which had been sanctioned and supplied by the military. The vessel also consisted of state-of-the-art, high-quality video imaging, more powerful thrusters, and an integrated command-and-control system, powered by Arc technology.

Peter had a number of questions he wanted to ask Dr. Richards about his research article that was published regarding the team's record-breaking deep-sea expedition into the Mariana Trench. Gwen knew far more about marine oceanography than anyone in their graduating class at Oscorp's Institution of Academic Excellence.

Peter was interested in discussing the marine program specializations with Gwen; she was planning to specialize in marine mechanical engineering. Gwen had always intrigued Peter, being as intelligent as she was. She was able to challenge him in ways that no one else their age could. Even with marine mechanical engineering being Gwen's primary interest, she could hold her own discussing a multitude of topics with Peter on marine biology, micro-organisms, and marine DNA sequencing, which was what Peter's program would primarily consist of next year at Oscorp's Institution of Academic Excellence.

Peter was interested in selecting a program specializing in marine biology and genetic engineering. Marine genetic engineering involves modifying the genetic makeup of marine organisms to achieve specific goals, such as enhancing growth, developing new traits, or improving resilience to environmental changes. This field utilizes techniques like gene editing to alter DNA to impact how organisms develop and function.

He was excited to hear Gwen's thoughts regarding the research

article that Dr. Richards wrote on the expedition into the Mariana Trench. He wanted to pick her brain and go over the engineering aspects of the submersible vessel, hoping that they'd learn more about it soon. Gwen planned to apply for the marine mechanical engineering internship and teach at Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography, with the hopes of getting to work directly under Dr. Richards and his team, The Fantastic Four.

Dr. Reed Richards was the expedition leader and co-helmsman of the deep-sea submersible vessel, in addition to being Oscorp's chief naval architectural engineer of the vessel.

Dr. Victor Vondume was the technician of the remotely operated submersible vehicle; as well as being Oscorp's chief marine engineer.

Dr. Richards and Dr. Vondume's areas of expertise complimented each other extremely well. Their roles were similar, but different, and covered a wide range, keeping the team small.

Ben Grimm was chief helmsman of the deep-sea submersible vessel, with the highest authority on the ship.

Jonathan Stoarm was the pilot of the remotely operated vehicle and a junior engineer, specializing in underwater robotics.

He was also the younger brother of Marine Biologist, Dr. Susan Stoarm-Richards, who was the wife of Dr. Reed Richards. She was a renowned aquatic expert in marine species and DNA analysis of marine genetics and microbiology.

Peter held Gwen in high regard and thought that applying for an internship under Dr. Richards' team was an excellent decision. He aspired to do the same for his program specializing in marine biology and genetic engineering, under Dr. Susan Stoarm-Richards.

Peter came downstairs and put his jacket on the stairway railing as he sat down on the bench and tied up his shoes. He locked the front door and ran down the driveway, trying not to get completely soaked. He opened the car door, threw his backpack and gym bag in the back seat, and hopped in. His glasses had droplets of rain on the lenses and began to fog up as soon as he got in the vehicle. He buckled his seatbelt, took them off and wiped the lenses. Peter was a small boy for his age; he was thin, having light auburn-colored hair with green eyes and freckles on his nose and cheeks.

"I swear, you would think we live in Washington State with how much rain we've been getting lately," said Richard, turning on the vehicle's defogger as he looked over his shoulder while backing out of the driveway.

Traffic was heavy as usual in the heart of New York City. Mary didn't particularly enjoy driving, much less in the rain, but would have to drive to Oscorp after they dropped Richard off at the pier. They pulled up to the dock,

still having fifteen minutes before the ferry would be departing.

"Does everyone have everything? Did you remember your security badge, Peter?" asked Richard.

"Yeah, I remembered it," he said, annoyed by the question.

Peter had forgotten his security pass three times since the new security measures had been implemented at Oscorp.

"You don't want to put poor old Mr. Berkley in the position of having to send you home to get it again, now, do you? That would make it… how many times now?" asked Mary, teasingly.

"I have a funny story while we wait for Mr. Osborn. A long time ago, when your mother and I first started working for Oscorp, the company was much smaller then, and Mr. Berkley would eat his lunch in the cafeteria with us. He got into this habit of asking me, 'What did the wife make for lunch today?' This went on until one day your mother made us egg salad sandwiches for lunch," Richard said, as he began to laugh while trying to tell the story.

"Here we go, let it out," said Mary, annoyed.

"I opened up my lunch bag, and Mr. Berkley turned to me and asked, 'What's that you got there today, Richard?' I turned, opening the lid to my container with your mother's famous egg salad sandwiches in it. He stood up almost instantly and started gagging uncontrollably from the smell. He then stuck his head in the garbage bin where he proceeded to lose his lunch. When he finally stood back up, his lips had turned white, his face had turned pale green, and I was speechless," Richard said, now unable to contain his laughter, as he went on.

"I've never seen anything like it. We found out later that he has a severe sensitivity to the smell of eggs. Needless to say, he hasn't asked, 'What did the wife make for lunch?' ever since," said Richard, taking his glasses off to wipe the tears streaming down his face.

"That was so funny," said Mary, sarcastically.

"There's Mr. Osborn. I've got to run. I'll see you two tonight. The ferry leaves from Ravencroft at 5:30pm. We have a driver scheduled to take us to Oscorp once we get back. I'll see you around 7pm," said Richard.

"Okay, I'll be enjoying my night at the lab. Waiting impatiently," quipped Mary, as she unbuckled her seat belt and got out of the car to switch to the driver's seat.

"Bye, son. Have fun tonight," Richard said, as he opened the door to the car.

"Bye, Dad. Thanks, I will," said Peter, unbuckling his seat belt to get in

the front seat.

Richard kissed his wife and made his way down the pier to the dock, where he met up with Norman, who was standing there waiting to board the ferry.

“Good morning, Richard. How was your drive? Did you have any trouble finding the pier?” asked Norman, making an effort to maintain a pleasant demeanor.

“Good morning, Mr. Osborn. No, we didn’t any have trouble finding it, but traffic was slow this morning with the heavy rain we’ve been getting. I’m glad we left early,” Richard said, while removing his glasses to wipe the speckles of rain off the lenses.

They boarded the ferry with several others that Richard presumed must have worked at Ravencroft, as he and Norman made their way down the corridor to their seats. There were armed military officers that were stationed on board carrying semi-automatic weapons as well, which made Richard feel uneasy.

“What kind of facility did you say this was, Mr. Osborn? An armed ferry ride seems a little excessive, no?” asked Richard, cheekily.

He was already feeling anxious enough knowing he had to present his research to a boardroom of professionals he had never met before.

“Well, as I said, this is a state-of-the-art facility with some of the most advanced technology available. Think of what we could do with that technology at Oscorp. It could potentially advance your research further. There are only a few individuals in the world that are capable of assisting with your research in NeoGenics,” said Norman, trying to ease Richard’s mind.

Richard nodded reluctantly, looking out the rain speckled window. The rest of the way was spent in silence, as neither of them cared for small talk. The captain of the ship came on the speaker to announce they would be arriving in five minutes.

“Well, that’s a relief,” said Richard, happy to be getting off the boat, as he was feeling somewhat queasy.

“The ferry ride was shorter than I expected; it only took forty-five minutes,” said Norman.

“Did they send an agenda to outline what they have planned for the day?” asked Richard.

“No, they just requested a presentation of your research for their team. I’m scheduled to meet with their director for a quick one-on-one at some point this morning,” said Norman.

The ferry approached the pier on the island, where they were greeted by more armed guards that escorted them into a small bus that drove them through the security gate. They pulled up to the checkpoint as the gate closed behind them, making a loud buzzing noise that startled Richard. He wasn't a fan of the security measures that were recently implemented at Oscorp, but this was an entirely different level of security.

They entered the building single file with the others that were on the ferry with them and were led to the west wing of the building for a security screening. They placed their briefcases on the conveyor belt, and walked through the security screening, which consisted of facial recognition technology that was used to verify the identity of individuals while present in the facility. During the screening process their fingerprints were taken, as well as a retinal scan, which Richard didn't think was necessary and found particularly invasive for a one-day visit to the facility.

Following the screening process, they were given a physical identification passport card, which granted them access to the facility going forward. Richard was both impressed and confused by how quickly they were able to generate these identification cards. Again, he was left wondering why they would need this for a one-time meeting. Norman was also thrown off by the security measures that were taken.

"My apologies, Richard. I wasn't informed that they would require this level of screening for entry into the facility," said Norman.

Norman could sense the uncertainty in Richard and didn't want to alarm him. His plan was to ease him into working with the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency, not scare him off the NeoGenics project. However, Richard quickly realized that they were entering a maximum-security military facility.

They made their way through the security screening and were approached by three individuals who immediately caught Richard's attention. The man to his left was wearing a lab coat, and while he didn't stand out, he gave Richard an unsettling feeling. The man in the middle was dressed in a military uniform displaying a high-ranking eagle emblem and wore an eyepatch over his left eye. To his right was a small, twisted man, seated in a technically advanced wheelchair. He wore a lab coat and an odd pair of goggles.

As they approached, the man in military attire began to speak, which for some reason caused the hair on Richard's neck to stand up.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Welcome to Ravencroft. My name is Colonel Nicholas Fury. My associate here to my right is Chief Biochemical Geneticist Dr. Farley Stillwell, and to my left, Head Geneticist and Bioengineer Dr. Odo Zola."

"Thank you, Colonel Fury. It's a pleasure to be here," said Norman.

“Please forgive the security measures, gentlemen; it’s strictly protocol. The upper west half of the complex is a state-of-the-art facility consisting of our research laboratories. We have our industrial and engineering laboratories that are located on the east side of the facility, such as our naval defense, naval architecture, and marine engineering labs. The lower half of the complex is the reason this is a maximum-security facility; it was built before the labs were constructed and was formerly known as Ravencroft Institute for the Criminally Insane. However, gentlemen, you needn’t concern yourselves with the lower half of the facility. The upper half of the complex was designed to be entirely separate. The criminal institution is located below ground and is the reason for the military presence. Security is a top priority at Ravencroft, only granting entry to personnel with the credentials to access that part of the facility, hence the reason for the access cards and retinal scan. Please, follow me. I’d like to take you through the laboratory before Norman and I branch off,” said the Colonel.

He tapped his access card to the security panel reader and with his good eye looked through the retinal scan. The door buzzed loudly, opening automatically. Richard was anxious. He felt like this could be a scene out of an old science fiction horror movie. He glanced down at the man in the wheelchair, feeling sorry for him; he seemed so frail.

I suppose we’re all fighting for something; perhaps he’s trying to develop a cure for his disability, thought Richard, reminding him of his lab partner, Dr. Curt Connors.

Richard felt that Curt should have been at the meeting with them. Curt lost his arm while serving in the Vietnam war. He had just graduated from university and was newly married with a baby on the way. Feeling a sense of duty and patriotism for his country, Curt enlisted to serve in the military. While deployed in Vietnam, Curt was on a routine drop to deliver food, supplies, and medical aid to stationed soldiers when the vehicle struck a landmine. Tragically, the team was killed, and Curt was left severely injured from the explosion, resulting in his arm being amputated. After two months of being hospitalized, Curt was honorably discharged and sent home. In a state of severe depression and with his future uncertain, he and his wife sadly divorced. Curt was reduced to collecting a veterans disability pension to survive.

He stumbled upon a research article one afternoon that referenced the study of cross-species genetics being conducted at Trask Industries by Dr. Richard Parker. Having a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology, Curt became obsessed with the project, devoting himself entirely to the research. He has since displayed exceptional promise with his research in NeoGenics. He genetically mapped the crested gecko and the Pogona lizard genomes; the two species are renowned for their regenerative ability. Dr. Connors went on to engineer a Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum aimed to modify the subject's

genes. The Reptilian Gene therapy Serum introduces a gene encoding a specific antigen into the subject's cells, causing the cells to produce that antigen in the subject.

However, toxicology studies on the Reptilian Gene therapy Serum have yet to meet the requirements during preclinical trials. This is a procedure that is highly volatile, and the results can change unexpectedly. The subject receives the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum containing specific genetic material, which is then taken up by the subject's cells to modify the genes of the subject. There was a remarkable instance in which Dr. Connors and the team had a significant breakthrough. During preclinical trials, they were able to regrow the limbs of nine rodent test subjects that unfortunately perished shortly after their limbs had regrown. A notable deficiency was that the regrown limbs were not identical replicas to the ones lost. Some were deformed, slightly bigger or smaller, or consisted of cartilage instead of bone. The experiment proved to be extremely promising, and Richard encouraged Curt to continue his research, believing it was simply a matter of time before he had a successful trial.

They made their way through the laboratory. Richard followed the man's wheelchair, which was extremely advanced, making no sound at all. It moved along silently at the touch of the control on the arm of the chair. He had never seen a device quite like it on the market and wanted to ask the man where it was manufactured out of sheer curiosity. He refrained, however, feeling it wasn't appropriate.

The Colonel led them through another security checkpoint and down the hall, entering the Biochemical Genetics Laboratory. The laboratory was extraordinary, having extremely advanced equipment, displaying technology Richard had never seen before.

"I wanted to take some time this morning to give you a quick tour to showcase some of the technology we're working with here at Ravencroft. The entire facility is powered by the late Howard Stark's patented Arc Reactor, allowing us to utilize the most advanced technology available," said Colonel Fury.

"I heard of Arc technology many years ago, from my father," said Norman.

"Arc Technology is used to power many of our devices, such as Dr. Zola's wheelchair. The chair is operated by a control on the arm of the chair and doesn't require charging. Interestingly enough, the wheelchair isn't the most impressive device to assist Dr. Zola around the facility. There's an apparatus that he's wearing under his lab coat that was created by the late Dr. Anton Vanko. It's also comprised of Arc technology along with one of the rarest metals known to man. Odo, if you would, show the gentlemen the apparatus that was designed by Dr. Vanko to help assist you around the

laboratory," ordered the Colonel, as he observed the two men from Oscorp, waiting to gauge their reaction.

Suddenly, four cylindrical appendages appeared, extending out from slits that ran down behind each arm of the small man's lab coat. The mechanical appendages were roughly three inches in diameter and were able to extend considerably in length.

Richard stood there in complete amazement, wondering how this was accomplished. Norman glanced over at Richard, having read about Dr. Odo Zola in the classified documents earlier in the week. Norman didn't expect the Colonel to reveal such technology in the presence of Richard Parker. He was uncertain how Parker would perceive the highly advanced military technology.

"Odo was blessed by the late Dr. Anton Vanko, who brilliantly engineered the apparatus to assist him with his disability. Would you care to demonstrate the functionality of the apparatus for the gentlemen please, Odo?" asked Colonel Fury.

"Certainly," said the small, twisted man with a subtle German accent.

He tilted the control on the arm of the chair making his way towards them. The wheelchair moved silently while the mechanical appendages slowly retracted as he got closer.

He seems to have control of them, but how? thought Richard, completely taken aback by what he was witnessing.

Odo, now a few feet in front of the men, extended one of the mechanical arms towards them.

"That's amazing," said Richard, unable to hide his curiosity, as he stepped forward to examine the mechanical apparatus.

He inspected the cylindrical appendages, which appeared to have a small camera lens located at the end of each appendage. Around the lens there were three flexible protruding grips that functioned as a mechanical claw, allowing the appendages to handle things. It silently extended, displaying the engineering expertise of Dr. Vanko. It picked a file up off the desk effortlessly and retracted back to Odo without spilling the contents of the folder.

"That is truly remarkable craftsmanship. What type of metal was the apparatus forged from?" asked Richard.

"It's made of an extremely rare metal that was once on the periodic table. However, due to its rarity, it was removed in the early 1900s," the Colonel interjected.

Richard continued inspecting the mechanical apparatus, aware the

Colonel had deflected the question.

"Please, show Dr. Parker to the boardroom so he can get set up for the presentation he's prepared. Norman and I will join you shortly," said the Colonel.

Colonel Fury led Norman out of the laboratory as Richard turned and followed the two gentlemen down the corridor and into the boardroom. Richard had so many questions he wanted to ask the soft spoken man in the unusual wheelchair.

Richard proceeded to hook his laptop up to the projector, thinking the boardroom seemed dull in comparison to the laboratory. His mind was still trying to process the strange apparatus affixed to the small, disabled man, which somehow seemed to move on its own accord.

How was he controlling the appendages? wondered Richard.

He was curious what the Colonel and Mr. Osborn were discussing during their meeting. He was so caught up with the device that he forgot that Norman mentioned he had a scheduled one-on-one with the Colonel this morning. This wasn't what he expected, he glanced around at the empty boardroom anxiously as the two men silently waited for him to finish setting up his laptop for the presentation.

"Will there be others joining us when Mr. Osborn and Colonel Fury return?" asked Richard, turning to face the gentleman standing across the boardroom table in the lab coat.

The man didn't reply, throwing Richard off as he looked down and continued setting up his laptop for the presentation.

"Dr. Stillwell, wasn't it? We didn't properly meet," he said, as he reached across the table and shook the man's hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well, Dr. Parker. We can begin as soon as Mr. Osborn and the Colonel return," said Dr. Stillwell, as he pulled the chair out from the boardroom table and sat down.

"I must say, the facility has exceeded my expectations," said Richard, attempting to alleviate the awkwardness.

Dr. Stillwell's features were hard and worn. His face had deep-cut lines around his eyes, forehead, and mouth, with greasy dark hair and a small, tapered mustache.

"Will it just be the five of us?" asked Richard, confused by the lack of response to the question earlier.

"Yes," said Dr. Stillwell, coolly.

Richard was somewhat thrown off, unsure what to make of the

situation. He assumed that he would be presenting his research to a team of geneticists at Ravencroft.

There were a number of technicians working in the laboratory, thought Richard.

"As I'm sure you're aware, Dr. Parker, there aren't many in the field of NeoGenics. There are maybe a handful of geneticists in the world that have experience mapping the animal, insect, and human genome. Fortunately, I believe three of them are in this room at this very moment," said Dr. Stillwell.

"I suppose that's true," said Richard, thinking Curt should have been invited to assist with the presentation at the very least.

"I've taken great interest in your research, Dr. Parker," said Dr. Stillwell.

"I'm flattered, thank you," said Richard, modestly.

"Dr. Zola has been following your work for some time now and introduced me to your research. I found it to be brilliant and exceptionally fascinating. Tell me, what led you to attempt to breed the spiders? Was it so you could study the hunting habits and traits of the engineered species, or was it when you realized you couldn't replicate the experiment?" asked Dr. Stillwell.

Realizing it was a backhanded question, he paused for a moment, thinking of how to respond as Mr. Osborn and Colonel Fury entered the boardroom, interrupting the conversation.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, gentlemen. Are we all set up and ready to go?" asked the Colonel.

"Yes, sir. Dr. Parker is connected and ready to present his research," said Dr. Stillwell.

"Excellent. Let's get started," said the Colonel, as he took his seat at the head of the boardroom table.

"Certainly, gentlemen. It's my pleasure to present Oscorp's research in NeoGenics this morning. I'd like to start us off with a few words about my colleague, Dr. Curt Connors. It's unfortunate that he isn't with us today, but he certainly deserves a mention. Dr. Connors has made significant progress utilizing genetic engineering techniques to introduce specific genes into test subject's cells. He has most recently expanded his research, mapping and editing the genome of an amphibian, called axolotl (Ambystoma mexicanum), which is a species of salamander. He's been conducting preclinical trials using various gene therapy techniques and exploring alternate methods of serum administration. Oscorp's gene therapy research could potentially revolutionize modern medicine as we know it. Gene therapy seeks to modify or manipulate the expression of a gene or to alter the biological properties of

living cells for therapeutic use. Gene therapy works by adding new copies of a gene that is broken, or by replacing a defective or missing gene in a subject's cells with a healthy version of that gene. It's the transplantation of normal genes into cells in place of missing or defective ones in order to correct genetic disorders. His research has shown great promise," said Richard, as he felt it was appropriate to acknowledge Curt's contribution to their research before beginning the presentation.

"A year ago we genetically engineered a species of arachnid using gene editing and splicing techniques, also known as recombinant DNA technology. Genome editing is a technique that gives scientists the ability to change an organism's DNA. These technologies allow genetic material to be added, removed, or altered at particular locations in the genome. Several methods of genome editing have been developed, such as processes where DNA sequences from different sources are combined to create new genetic combinations, often used to produce desired traits. Gene splicing involves taking pieces of DNA from one or more organisms and joining them with the DNA of a host cell. The resulting DNA, which is a combination of different sources, is called recombinant DNA. Gene splicing was a key technique we used in the genetic engineering of the arachnids. The genetic makeup of the organism was altered and sequenced to achieve a specific outcome. Genetic sequencing was a laboratory technique we used to determine the order of bases in a DNA molecule. The sequence of bases, or nucleotides, in DNA encodes the information that cells use to develop and function. Genome editing, gene splicing and genetic sequencing techniques enabled us to take the DNA from three separate species of spider and extract genomic information from exons and regions of interest in the arachnids genome and splice them together to create a genetically engineered species of spider. When the arachnid DNA was spliced and edited, it was sequenced with code from the human genome containing a sequence of four nucleotide bases: adenine (A), guanine (G), cytosine (C), and thymine (T). These bases form the 'letters' of the genetic code, which decides an individual's traits and characteristics. The specific sequence of these bases determines the genetic information carried by DNA," said Richard, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose as he continued to describe the spiders that were selected for the project.

"The first species selected was the Darwin's Bark Spider: Caerostris Darwini, from the Araneidae family native to Madagascar. The Darwin's Bark Spider's orb web is the largest and strongest of all the arachnid species worldwide, ranging up to 4,340 square inches (30 feet). The web's bridge line is the longest spanning web ever observed and can extend up to eighty-two feet. The web's tensile strength measures at 1.6 GPa, which translates to over 230,000 pounds per square inch, demonstrating immense strength. The silk that it produces is the strongest amongst all spider species and is proven to

be the toughest biological material ever studied; on a weight-for-weight basis, it's much stronger than steel. It's ten times tougher than a similar size piece of Kevlar due to its characteristic spider silk strength combined with unusual extensibility of up to 91% its length. Their unique web architecture and exceptionally strong silk allows the Darwin's Bark Spider to occupy a niche habitat, catching flying insects above bodies of water where other spiders cannot," said Richard, as he glanced up before changing the slide.

"The second spider species that was selected for the project was the Wolf Spider. Wolf Spiders are members of the family Lycosidae. They are robust, agile hunters that live mostly in solitude, hunt alone, and do not spin webs. Most spider species have poor eyesight; however, the Wolf Spider is gifted with exceptional eyesight. These nocturnal spiders possess the third-best eyesight of all species of arachnids. They even have a tapetum lucidum structure within their primary pair of eyes, meaning that if a light were to be shined at a Wolf Spider in the dark, its eyes would shine back like a cat's, making them one of the most effective spider species when it comes to hunting their prey at night. Wolf Spiders primarily hunt at night, relying on their instincts when hunting, and do not use webs to catch their prey. They ambush, preferring to chase and pounce on the insect. They hold the insect in their strong mandibles, injecting a venom that liquifies the creature's insides. The Wolf Spider is fast on foot as well, being able to run two feet per second which makes them exceptional at catching prey, but equally exceptional at escaping potential predators," said Richard, as he moved on to the last slide.

"The third and final species of arachnid selected was a genus of Ray Spiders called Theridiosoma; also known as the Slingshot Spider. Found in the Peruvian Amazon, this tiny spider can launch itself with its triangle shaped web one-hundred times faster than a cheetah can run, making them pinpoint accurate hunters and the fastest moving arachnids known to man. When it launches itself, it reaches speeds high enough to catch the fastest of prey. Slingshot Spiders are known to weave conical webs, these webs have a single strand attached to the tip of the cone, which the spider reels in to ramp up the tension. When the spider senses a potential meal, it releases the web. The spider and web together zing forward, ensnaring the prey. The spider's amazing acceleration produces velocities of four meters per second and subjects the spider to forces of approximately 130Gs, more than ten times what fighter pilots can withstand without blacking out," said Richard.

Amazing, thought Dr. Zola, as Richard flipped to the next slide of the presentation.

"We built a large terrarium to replicate a natural habitat for the genetically engineered species and have been conducting our research on them for a little over a year. We've observed and documented the hunting habits and abilities of the spiders, concluding that they indeed possess

specific anatomic similarities from all three species that they were genetically engineered from. We measured their web tensile strength and extensibility, proving it matched that of the Darwin's Bark Spider. They have night vision like the Wolf Spider, having a tapetum lucidum structure within their primary pair of eyes that glow at night. However, the genetically engineered species have demonstrated unique and complex hunting strategies. The arachnid has exhibited a combination of hunting tactics that are not used by any of the three species that were used to genetically engineer the spider. The engineered species have been observed using complex problem-solving skills and adapt when exposed to unfamiliar habitats. No other species of arachnid has ever been documented using so many different methods of hunting. Just as the Slingshot Spider uses a conical web to slingshot itself to its prey, the genetically engineered species was documented modifying a bridge line which stretched the length of the terrarium. Their eyesight is so impressive that they're able to hunt perched up on the highest vantage point, capable of seeing prey across the terrarium. They ramp up the tension of the bridge line, waiting until a meal is spotted, and slingshot themselves the entire length of the terrarium, ambushing their victim with pinpoint accuracy. They are also capable of running down and pouncing on their prey, moving at approximately two feet per second. The species' ability to slingshot themselves with such accuracy and speed is especially impressive because of the significant size difference between the Slingshot Spider and the engineered species. The Slingshot Spider has a body length of only two millimeters in comparison to the genetically engineered spiders, which measure an average of 1.09 inches. The largest on record was a female with a body length of 1.4 inches. The genetically engineered species, being significantly larger in size compared to the Slingshot Spider, allows them to adapt the technique to hunt a wider variety of prey, making them a more effective predator. What was extremely fascinating was that the genetically engineered species developed different methods of hunting depending on what kind of prey they were targeting. The terrarium was designed to simulate a natural environment, containing a wide variety of bio diverse creatures. We've documented the genetically engineered species hunting small birds, lizards, rodents and a wide range of insects. Thank you, gentlemen, that's all I have. Does anyone have any questions?" asked Richard, as he leaned over the table and shut off the projector.

"Thank you, Dr. Parker. That was an excellent presentation; your research in NeoGenics is extraordinary," said the Colonel.

"I believe we can assist Oscorp in achieving consistency with the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum. I'm interested to see the research analysis regarding the salamander genome that Dr. Connors has recently mapped. Dr. Zola and I have experience with gene therapy technology," said Dr. Stillwell.

"Thank you, Dr. Stillwell. I'm sure you'll have the chance to review Dr.

Connors' research analysis at some point," said Richard, somewhat hesitantly.

"Dr. Zola is going to be working with you and the team on-site at Oscorp to assist with your research in NeoGenics," said the Colonel, abruptly.

Richard turned to face the Colonel as he was speaking and noticed the man in the wheelchair's facial expression change. He sensed what seemed to be astonishment from the man when the Colonel mentioned that he'd be working at Oscorp. No one seemed to catch his reaction except for Richard. He wondered what the Colonel said that caught him off guard.

"As we discussed, Oscorp has been offered to expand its current Weapons Division contract to include our Institution of Oceanography and NeoGenics Division. We've accepted the offer and will be working in conjunction with the team here at Ravencroft going forward," said Norman, as he tried to gauge Richard's reaction.

"I see. I'm looking forward to working together," said Richard, awkwardly, as he pushed his glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose.

Peter sat in class looking out the window, watching the water droplets trickle down the glass. He stared blankly, daydreaming about the Festivities Event that was being held after school in the Grand Hall. He glanced over at Gwen , who was sitting across the room listening attentively as the professor continued his lecture on thermodynamics. Peter sat there anxiously, unable to stop fidgeting.

Waiting for this day to end is torture, he thought.

He had his gym bag in his locker with his favorite outfit in it that he planned to change into for the Festivities Event. He was curious if Gwen was going to wear her school uniform to the Festivities Event after class or if she brought a change of clothes as well. The school uniform at Oscorp consisted of a black blazer or cardigan with a black tie and black dress slacks, which made Peter appear older than the average thirteen-year-old. The blazer and cardigan had a green logo of their school's emblem and name: Oscorp's Institution of Academic Excellence.

When the lecture ended, Peter went to his locker to get his gym bag, then headed to the boys' changing room. He recalled his father asking if he'd mind inviting Harry to join them during the Festivities Event. He quickly got changed and headed down to the Grand Hall to see if he could find Harry amongst all the students. He was surprised at how many students were already gathered throughout the Grand Hall. The sound of everyone talking was amplified due to the acoustics in the Hall. Oscorp may have been a cutting-edge facility, but the building was constructed in the 1800s and the architectural design was absolutely stunning. The one-hundred-foot domed ceiling was something to behold and always made Peter feel small. He made his way down the stairs as he scanned the area below trying to locate Harry.

He should be easy enough to spot; he's practically a miniature copy of Mr. Osborn, thought Peter, humorously.

Peter felt somewhat sorry for Harry. Being Mr. Osborn's son had to be tough. Peter could tell the type of man Mr. Osborn was and could safely assume that Harry didn't get many hugs as a child. He spotted Gwen, Liz and Betty standing by the statue of Gilgamesh, which dwarfed the girls by comparison, with the statue being two and half meters tall.

Good call on the change of clothes, Pete. You were on the money with that one, he thought, as he could barely conceal the smirk on his face when he saw that the girls had all changed into casual clothes.

Gwen noticed Peter coming down the stairs and waved him over. "Hey, Peter!" she called out as she made her way over to him.

Liz and Betty both saw Peter coming down the stairs and knew Gwen would be gone the rest of the night if they didn't follow. They both liked Peter; he was always friendly and surprisingly mature for a boy his age. Although, it annoyed them when he was around, because he always stole Gwen's attention with his playful, unassuming charm. Unbeknownst to him, Gwen quite enjoyed their playful banter, finding Peter to be extremely witty and relatable. She had known Peter longer than she knew anyone else at Oscorp. They would fall into endless conversations that neither of them ever seemed to tire from.

"Hey, Gwen! Did you get a chance to read Dr. Richards' research article that was published on the deep-sea expedition into the Mariana Trench?" asked Peter, barely greeting her before asking about the article.

"Only as soon as it came out! It was so interesting getting to read about their expedition. I recently heard that Dr. Vondume will be incorporating new state-of-the-art simulation technology for Oscorp's deep-sea robotic program. The simulation technology will apparently include their remotely operated vehicles, autonomous vessels, and deep-sea samplers," said Gwen, enthusiastically.

"Really? I'll have to check it out; that's such a cool program! I've been dying to talk to you about the research article ever since it came out," said Peter, as he and Gwen walked towards the girls.

"Hey, Liz. Hi, Betty," said Peter, greeting the two girls with a smile.

"Hi, Peter. No talking about school stuff, okay? We've had enough lectures for the day," said Liz, sarcastically.

They knew Gwen and Peter's routine all too well by now and wanted to enjoy the Festivities tonight.

"I haven't said a thing about thermodynamics. Gwen, have I mentioned anything at all about thermodynamics?" asked Peter, playfully, as

Gwen went along with the ruse.

Peter had a charming, witty side to his personality that many didn't get to see until he was comfortable enough to open up. He often resorted to humor to diffuse tension and make the girls laugh whenever they would get annoyed with him and Gwen's endless conversations about marine engineering and oceanography. His uncle Ben once told him he had his father's comedic dry wit, combined with his mother's sarcastic tone. Peter stood there listening to the girls talk about the concert venue they were planning on going to, when he saw Harry coming down the stairs of the Grand Hall.

Peter leaned in, whispering to Gwen, "My dad asked me if I would invite Harry Osborn to join us during the festivities. Mr. Osborn and my dad are at some big meeting on a remote island today."

"Really?" said Gwen, as she turned to see Harry making his way down the stairs.

"Would you mind if I invite him over to hang out with us?" asked Peter.

"No," said Gwen, as Peter turned and walked over to go meet Harry at the bottom of the staircase.

"Hey, Harry," said Peter, catching Harry off guard as he turned to see who was calling his name.

"Oh, hey," said Harry, trying to recall the boy's name.

"It's Peter, Peter Parker. We've met a few times. I'm Dr. Parker's son. My dad works in the NeoGenics Division. I didn't think you'd remember," Peter said, with a chuckle.

"Yeah, sorry. I know who you are, I'm not good with remembering names. What's up?" asked Harry, confused why Peter had approached him.

He was bigger than Peter, but small for a boy his age. He had dark auburn-colored hair and dark brown eyes with distinct features, strikingly akin to his father. He had a sharpness to his way of speaking that put most people off that first met him. He had few friends, but no one bothered him due to being an Osborn.

"Our dads are at a meeting and won't be back for a while. I figured you'd be stuck here waiting for him to get back, too. If you want, you can come hang out with me, Gwen, Liz, and Betty," said Peter, expecting Harry to decline.

Harry glanced over Peter's shoulder to see the girls standing by the statue of Gilgamesh. He had seen the two girls around Oscorp but had never talked to them before.

“The blonde girl; I’ve met her before. My father is friends with her dad. What’s her name again?” asked Harry.

“That’s Gwen. Liz is on the left and Betty’s on the right. I can introduce you if you want to come over,” said Peter, surprised that Harry was actually interested in who they were.

“Sure, what else is there to do?” said Harry, following Peter as he walked towards the girls.

Peter wasn’t prepared for an actual introduction. He didn’t think Harry would want to hang out with him and a bunch of girls that were two years younger than him.

“Harry, you’ve met Gwen. This is Liz and Betty. Everyone, this is Harry,” said Peter.

“Nice to meet… everyone,” said Harry, casually.

“You’re only welcome to join us if you promise not to talk about anything related to school,” said Liz, sarcastically, looking at Gwen and Peter.

“I can definitely promise that. I wouldn’t be caught dead talking about school during the Festivities Event,” he said, with a smirk.

“I like him already. I think we found your replacement, Peter,” said Betty, putting her nose up playfully.

Peter was surprised that Harry fell in with everyone so easily. He had a much harder time winning Liz and Betty over than Harry did. However, realizing it worked in his favor, Peter had no complaints with Harry joining the group. Now that Liz and Betty were occupied, he could talk with Gwen uninterrupted.

“Oh yeah, I’ve been meaning to tell you that I overheard my dad talking to my mom earlier; he was saying that Oscorp is conducting another expedition into the Mariana Trench with an upgraded deep-sea submersible vessel this coming Monday,” said Peter, waiting to see Gwen’s reaction.

“Are you serious?” asked Gwen, excitedly.

“You bet!”

“I haven’t heard anything about it. What time are they scheduled to launch on Monday?” she asked, confused.

“I’m not exactly sure. I just heard him tell my mom it was happening Monday morning, but they haven’t announced it publicly for some reason. My dad mentioned that Dr. Richards invited him to go to Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography like last time to watch the launch ceremony on the big screen in the auditorium. I’m going to ask my dad if I can go too,” said Peter, as casually as he could manage.

“Really? You’re so lucky!” said Gwen, enviously.

“I could ask my dad if you can come with us. It shouldn’t be a problem,” said Peter, awkwardly.

“Really? You’ll ask if I can go too?” she asked, excitedly.

“Of course! It’ll give us a chance to find out what upgrades have been made to the deep-sea submersible vessel. We can go over what we want to specialize in for next year’s marine program. Our graduation’s coming up, and we both might be able to land an internship under The Fantastic Four if we plan it out just right,” said Peter, feeding off the enthusiasm in Gwen’s eyes.

“I’ll ask my parents if I can go when I get home,” said Gwen, unable to hide her excitement.

“Great! I’ll find out from my dad when he gets back from his meeting if he can get us in to watch the launch ceremony. I’ll call you as soon as I find out and let you know,” said Peter, eagerly, as his face turned red from blushing.

"You say it's terminal?" asked Brock.

"Glioblastomas is classified as stage four brain cancer. That's because this type of cancer is an aggressive form of astrocytoma," said the doctor, regretfully.

"How long do you estimate I got?" asked Eddie, devastated after receiving the news.

The doctor looked at him for a moment, contemplating how to explain the results.

"An individual's prognosis depends on the type and stage of cancer, as well as their age and general health at the time of diagnosis. For malignant tumors, outcomes depend on how slowly or quickly the tumor develops and responds to treatment. The average glioblastoma survival time is twelve to eighteen months. It's estimated that roughly twenty-five percent of patients survive more than a year, and about five percent of patients survive more than five years," the doctor said, grimly.

Brock stood up, his eyes were glazed over, and his head was foggy, like he was in a bad dream that he was expecting to wake up from.

"Look, I don't usually say things like this to patients because it's a slim chance, but statistically, one percent of patients have survived up to ten years," said the doctor.

"What's the longest that anyone's survived?' asked Eddie.

"The longest anyone's survived a glioblastoma is more than 20 years and counting," said the doctor sympathetically, trying to give Eddie a glimmer of hope.

"So, what's next?" he asked the doctor.

"Options might include surgery, radiation therapy, radiosurgery, chemotherapy or targeted therapy. Being a former marine, you look like you're in good shape considering the diagnosis. We can start you on a drug called Vorasidenib. It's a targeted cancer therapy that works by inhibiting the activity of the mutated genes called IDH, slowing the growth of the cancer cells," said the doctor.

"Sounds interesting. What's it cost for a drug like that, doc?" asked Brock.

The doctor paused for a moment, realizing the sobering reality of the times they were in.

"It can be pricey. Do you have medical insurance?" asked the doctor.

Eddie looked down at the floor, trying to understand the situation he now found himself in.

"Even partial coverage is better than none," said the doctor.

Eddie chuckled as he glanced at the doctor and shook his head.

"Investigative journalists that sell stories for a living in this city don't have medical insurance doc," Eddie said, his head pounding as he put his jacket on.

"I've written you a prescription for the headaches. I want you to read through this pamphlet I'm giving you. There's a phone number in the pamphlet you can call if you need support. This is a difficult thing to go through alone, Mr. Brock; it helps to talk to someone. The pamphlet will also help guide you with some treatment options. We'll discuss the option that best suits you during your next appointment. See the secretary at the front desk; she'll schedule your next appointment before you leave," said the doctor, handing Eddie the pamphlet and prescription.

Eddie scheduled his next appointment with the doctor's secretary and walked out of the office, hardly taking an upward glance as he made his way out of the hospital's cancer wing to the parking lot. He was exhausted, yet his mind wouldn't allow him to rest. He opened the door to his 1974 Chevrolet Monte Carlo and sat for a moment, staring out the window as two rats scurried along the building wall. He looked down at the pamphlet in his hand and tossed it on the passenger seat. Having no insurance or way of paying for treatment, Brock realized the desperate situation he was in.

Eighteen to twenty-four months isn't long, unless I'm stuck in some hospital bed. That would feel like an eternity, he thought, as he pulled out of the hospital parking lot.

Brock was supposed to meet with a friend after his doctor's appointment, a local detective named Terri Lee, but he needed to go to the pharmacy first to fill the prescription the doctor gave him to help alleviate the headaches. Everything felt surreal, like nothing he was doing mattered anymore.

Eddie, being a former marine, was always disciplined, following a strict workout regime even after leaving the military. He never smoked and lived a healthy lifestyle, occasionally drinking, but never excessively. That didn't seem to matter; he still got cancer, and now all that mattered was finding a way to come up with the money for the treatment he needed.

Brock had been meeting with Terri Lee to discuss a case that she had been investigating. They had worked together in the past when Brock was trying to expose political corruption in New York City. She was currently

investigating a string of murders that she believed were linked. There had been a series of similar crime scenes across the city. Lee suspected the murder scenes were deliberately planned out, believing the killer was leaving a trail for the police to find. There had been a total of five similar murder scenes across the city over the course of the year and the police had no leads on a potential suspect. The killings were gruesome in nature and not something Brock wanted to deal with right now.

Brock felt unwell but desperately needed money to pay his bills and to be able to afford the treatment and medication he needed. The country was in a recession, and times were especially hard for people right now, with Eddie being no exception.

What else am I going to do? Go home and wait to die? he thought, grimly.

J. Jonah Jameson was the Publishing Director at the Daily Bugle Newspaper. He was a hard-nosed man and a former marine, like Brock. That was the only reason he let Eddie continue to work as a freelance journalist for him. Brock desperately needed a steady source of income right now, but lately, Mr. Jameson refused to run any of Brock's stories. Mr. Jameson had been turning him away, claiming the stories he chose to write about didn't sell newspapers. This was only after Eddie tried to run a story about political corruption in New York, particularly regarding a certain political figure who stood to gain financial kickbacks from the construction firms that were contracted to rebuild infrastructure in rundown neighborhoods throughout the city.

Wilson Fisk was a politician and prominent figure in New York, having a reputation as a philanthropist. Brock caught wind from Terri Lee that a whistleblower had come forward about a program that was allegedly developed for nefarious purposes. They used what the whistleblower called disruption to destabilize districts in the inner city, using drugs and gun violence to push for more police funding and political control.

Brock's investigation detailed how this was strategically done while lining the pockets of corrupt politicians. Wilson Fisk was responsible for the development of the community housing projects in the inner city. He was a key figure in the story, having affiliations with the Mob, which controlled the construction firms that were contracted for the development of the housing projects. He also had strong political ties to many members in city council that approved the projects.

On the surface, Fisk appeared like he was working for the people, selling the project as affordable community housing. However, the whistleblower claimed that the project was actually designed to destabilize communities, using drugs and violent crimes to appeal for more funding and expand the police task force in the city. The whistleblower claimed that there

was a shadow figure known as “The Kingpin” that controlled an underground network of organized crime in the inner city. They strategically targeted specific areas to run down in order to get approval for the development of housing projects in the city. Drugs and violent crimes were key in destabilizing the community and lowering the value of the city district in order for Fisk to propose the inner-city housing project and appeal for an expansion of the police force.

City council voted, approving the project, and before long, Fisk had several city contracts under development in targeted districts. When construction was to take place, drug operations would strategically move out of the district to give the illusion the project and police presence had cleaned things up, gaining additional political favor from the public. Gangs, drugs, and violent crimes served as an excuse to expand law enforcement, while the media was utilized to control the political narrative each night. Chief Stacey was on the six o’clock news almost every night, preaching the need for more law enforcement and police expansion. He claimed that it was necessary due to rising crime rates caused by the city being in the middle of a drug epidemic. Eddie submitted the story to the Daily Bugle’s Chief Editor, Robbie Robertson. However, the story ran heavily edited due to Mr. Jameson’s intervention. He was not pleased with the story’s serious allegations. They ran with drugs and gang violence as the narrative instead of the whistleblower’s claims of disruption in targeted city districts. Political affiliations with underground crime to deliberately make neighborhoods unsafe and impoverished were excluded from the story entirely. Mr. Jameson later claimed the story was weak and had no merit due to the fact that the informant admitted that no one knew who “The Kingpin” was. After the story ran, Brock was blacklisted and has been reduced to freelance reporting ever since.

He picked up his prescription and headed to the coffee shop to meet with Terri Lee. He pulled into the parking lot across from the coffee shop and put the cancer pamphlet in his glove box. Brock was a private man and didn’t need anyone knowing his personal business. He ran across the street and peered in through the window of the coffee shop to see Terri Lee sitting in her usual spot, waiting for him to arrive.

He walked in the shop and ordered a coffee. Handing the man some change, he took his coffee and sat down across from Terri.

“Sorry I’m late. Damn traffic in the city this morning is atrocious,” he said, shaking off his jacket from the rain.

“You’re lucky I’m patient,” she said, as she pulled a folder out of her bag and slid it across the table.

“What’s this?” he asked, opening the folder.

“Last night’s fifth murder victim,” she said, as she lit a cigarette and blew out the match.

His head was pounding, and he was still feeling like he was in a dream. He looked through the details of the horrific crime scene, noting the similarities to the other murders. He held a clip of the negative images taken at the crime scene up to the light.

“I can’t make it out. What’s that say?” he asked, squinting at the negatives that Terri had taken from the department, which could have cost her job.

“It says Carnage. It was written in the victim’s blood,” Terri said, while exhaling cigarette smoke.

“Carnage? Is that supposed to be some kind of message or calling card?" asked Eddie, glancing up at Terri, suddenly realizing this could be lightning in a bottle.

He needed a story that could sell papers, and Carnage might just be the headline this story needed to gain some interest. He paused for a moment to think, having no other clear alternative.

“I’m going to take this story to the Chief Editor at the Bugle to see if he’ll help me pitch it to Jameson,” he said, as he looked at Terri to gauge her reaction.

“Do you think that’s a good idea? You remember what happened that last time you submitted a story based off one of my cases don’t you?” said Terri, reminding him of the whistleblower.

“That was different. Jameson doesn’t want the truth; he wants to sell newspapers. I can sell him this story, and the public will eat it up,” said Eddie, rather uncharacteristically.

She studied him a moment, wondering why he wanted to go to Mr. Jameson with the story so suddenly.

“What’s going on?” she asked, as she looked him up and down suspiciously.

“What?” asked Eddie, not prepared for Terri’s interrogation.

“Something’s off with you. What’s up? Or did you forget that I’m a detective, Eddie?”

He hesitated, trying to come up with something, but knew she’d see through him, and he didn’t have the energy for theatrics.

“I don’t really want to get into it right now. I need this story, Terri. I’ve got some things I need to take care of, and I could sure use the money,” he said, without making eye contact.

Brock suddenly realized he was emotionally unstable and should have taken some time to process the news. The doctor suggested that he should talk to someone, but he couldn't tell her yet. He wasn't ready. She looked at him closely but didn't push any further. Terri knew Brock well enough; she was on the short list of friends he had.

"Alright, what are you going to go to Mr. Jameson with?" she asked, curiously.

"I'm going to pitch Jameson a serial killer named Carnage," said Eddie, as he stared out the window at a man lying under the doorway of a building across the street.

"That's it? You think he'll buy it?" she asked, uncertain if Brock was making the right move.

"I'm going to have to sell it to him. I can't recall anything like this happening in New York City since the 'Son of Sam' serial killings in 1977. Jameson prefers tabloid news these days over real journalism," said Brock, frustrated that he had to lower himself to this for money.

Terri knew the type of man Brock was and genuinely admired him. She knew he must be in some kind of trouble financially for him to go to Mr. Jameson with something like this.

"You better have your story straight if you want Jameson to buy it. He won't go in on a loosely based hunch. You know that, Eddie," she said, cautioning him.

"I know, that's why I'm going to need some help. I need to compile the evidence from each of the murder scenes to highlight all the similarities," he said, as he got up from the table.

"Where are you going?" asked Terri.

"To the car to get my briefcase. We can use my notes from our meetings to go over each crime scene and list all the similarities between them," he said.

He got up and put his jacket on as he walked out of the coffee shop, stopping at the newspaper box. Beside it, there was a stand that had free tourist guide pamphlets of the city. He grabbed one and went to his car to get his briefcase. He walked back to the coffee shop, took his seat, and opened up the tourist guide pamphlet, which had a map of the entire city in it. Eddie began to mark the locations of each crime scene by making dots on the map and noticed a pattern with the fifth killing. He connected the dots, drawing a line between the locations of each murder site, glancing up at Terri once he was done, completely shocked by what he had just revealed.

"Is that a five-pointed inverted star?" asked Terri, taken aback by the revelation.

“No one’s put this together at the department yet?” asked Brock, staring intensely at Terri.

Terri was still enamored by the discovery, fixated on the map in disbelief.

“No, I’d know if they did. Word would get out in the department if they knew something like this,” she said, as she reached in her bag and lit another cigarette.

Finally, something in my favor for a change, he thought.

Nearly two hours later and he had the story ready to submit for editing.

“Look, Eddie, are you sure you want to go to the Bugle with this before the police department breaks it to the media? You know how Jameson can be,” she asked, concerned that he was acting rashly.

“Unfortunately, I’ve got no choice. I’ve run out of options,” said Eddie, honestly.

Terri felt somewhat responsible for Eddie being reduced to freelance reporting at the Daily Bugle. He was a twenty-nine-year-old aspiring investigative journalist that was beginning to make a name for himself before he began investigating a lead in a case she had received from an anonymous whistleblower. Brock was extremely skilled when it came to analytical research. Terri would often tell him he should’ve become a detective, believing he had the investigative skills of one. However, he had no interest, reminding her that detectives didn’t get to pick the cases they worked on. The truth of it was, he didn’t enjoy the endless homicide investigations that came with being a detective in New York City.

“Alright, I’m going to head over to the Bugle and submit the story to Robbie Robertson; he’s their Chief Editor. Pray that he’ll do me a favor and help me pitch the story to Jameson,” he said, as he gathered his things.

“Sure thing. Don’t get fired… again,” she said, with a smirk on her face.

“Thanks, Terri. I appreciate the lead,” he said, as he stood up, grabbing her hand and squeezing it gently.

“Don’t mention it. I’ll give you a call later to see how it went,” she said, reassuringly.

He nodded and made his way out of the coffee shop. He ran across the street while holding his briefcase above his head to shield himself from the heavy rainfall as he got in his car. He sat for a moment trying to gather himself, feeling overwhelmed with emotion suddenly. He felt nauseous, and his head was pounding, feeling like it was swelling with every beat of his

heart. He opened the glove box and took the prescription medication out of the bag. Shaking the pills from the bottle into his hand, he tilted his head back and swallowed them in desperate need of relief.

He started the car and turned the vehicle's defogger on. He was barely able to see out the car windows; the rain was coming down so hard. He waited for the windows to defog, then backed out of the parking spot. Time seemed to stop for Eddie after receiving the news from the doctor this morning, feeling like it should be much later than 11:15am. He sat in traffic trying to think. He had to figure out how he was going to get Robbie to help him sell this to Mr. Jameson.

Brock had never gone to Mr. Jameson with a story like this before, making him unsure of how he would react to it. The last few stories he tried to submit to the Bugle got rejected without making it to the editorial department. When he requested a meeting so he could try and pitch his story to Mr. Jameson, his secretary told Eddie that his schedule was completely booked.

He wasn't prepared but didn't have the luxury of time to think about it as he pulled up to the gate of the Daily Bugle. He flashed his media credential to the security guard as the man waved him through. Brock was well acquainted with everyone at the Bugle, having worked there since being discharged from the military.

Robbie Robertson was a friend from school that Eddie recommended to Mr. Jameson many years ago for a junior editor position. He hoped Robbie would remember the favor and pull through for him by helping him sell the story to Mr. Jameson and get it edited for print. He had written a short article in addition to the visual of the map, which consisted of the locations of each crime scene. When the dots marking each location of the murder sites were connected, they took the shape of a five-pointed star, otherwise known as an inverted pentagram: a symbol often associated with Satanism and the sigil of Baphomet, a goat-headed figure popularized by the Church of Satan. He paired the map and the article with the over-the-top headline: "New York City's Satanic Serial Killer 'Carnage' Strikes Again!"

Brock hoped to entice Mr. Jameson with the catchy headline and map linking the crime scenes together to uncover the inverted pentagram. The article went on to say, "Another chilling murder located in the heart of the city. Police found a single word at the crime scene written in the victim's blood: "Carnage," which some speculate to be the killer's alias. Police have yet to comment on whether the string of rooftop murders are connected, marking this the fifth murder of the year."

He was teetering on whether he should try and schedule a meeting with Mr. Jameson or to go see Robbie first. He was hoping that Robbie could help him pitch the story to Mr. Jameson and possibly get the editing process

started. He wondered if he missed the window to get the story in tomorrow morning's paper. Time was of the essence; he wasn't sure how long it would be before someone at the police department linked the crime scenes. The door shut to the elevator as he pressed the seventeenth floor to the Editing Department.

What choice do I have left? thought Eddie, realizing the consequences he would face if Jameson rejected the story.

The door opened as Eddie made his way down the hall to the Chief Editor's office. He found Robbie sitting at his desk reviewing tomorrow morning's stories that had been submitted for editing. He glanced up as Eddie knocked lightly on the door, trying not to startle him.

"Eddie, I haven't seen you in a while. What brings you to these parts? You got a story for J. Jonah?" asked Robbie, curiously.

"I need to ask for a favor, Robbie. I hate to come to you last minute like this, but I need your help getting a story edited for tomorrow's paper," said Eddie, trying not to sound as desperate as he was feeling.

"Get a story submitted to run tomorrow? Has J.J. signed off on it for print?" asked Robbie, thinking Eddie seemed somewhat out of character.

"I'm going to see if I can meet with him right now and get it approved. I was hoping you could do me a solid and start editing it for tomorrow morning's paper," said Brock, realizing what he was asking of Robbie.

"Eddie, if Mr. Jameson finds out I edited a story for print that he didn't approve, I could lose my job," said Robbie, unsure why Eddie would ask such a thing from him.

Brock turned and looked out into the hall, then shut the door to Robbie's office.

"I need this favor, Robbie. I'll convince Mr. Jameson to run the story, I promise. I just… I need this. Please, this is my only option right now," said Brock.

"I want to, Eddie, I do, but we both know what would happen if I were to do that. Get the story approved, then it's no problem at all. I'll have the story ready for you in two days," said Robbie.

Realizing Robbie wasn't going to risk his career editing a story for print that hadn't been approved, he decided he had no choice but to come out with it.

"Look, Robbie, I'm sorry to come to you like this. I was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer this morning. The medication is expensive, and I don't have much time to waste waiting for miracles," he said, catching

himself before being overtaken with emotion.

Brock looked at the floor, trying to fight back the despair he felt, as he still hadn't processed the news himself. Robbie had known Eddie for the better part of fifteen years now and had never known Eddie to fabricate the truth in any way, especially for money. Brock had a reputation for being an honest man that wouldn't sell out, even when it cost him his livelihood.

"Jesus, I'm so sorry to hear that, Eddie. I can't imagine what you're going through," said Robbie, shocked to hear the news.

Brock always appeared to be such a tough guy that it was hard to believe he was sick.

"Maybe you could talk to Mr. Jameson about giving you your old job back. I'm sure he would make an exception, considering the circumstance," said Robbie, trying to come up with a better solution than them both being escorted out of the Bugle, jobless.

"I'm out of options. If I can't get this story to run, I've got nothing else to fall back on," he said, still looking at the floor.

Robbie could see the desperation in him and knew he wasn't the type of man to look for a handout.

"I'm going to edit the story and get it ready for you, but let me be clear right now, Eddie: the story isn't going to run unless it gets approval from Mr. Jameson. Are you good with that?" asked Robbie in the most serious tone he could manage.

Brock glanced up with a look of relief. "You're my guardian angel, Robbie. I owe you one, buddy!" he said, gratefully.

"Here's the floppy disk consisting of the story and headline. Can you fit the map with the inverted pentagram linking the crime scenes together in with the story, or do you think it'll be too big?" asked Brock, who was shaking rather noticeably.

"Jesus Christ," said Robbie, looking at the map of the inverted pentagram in astonishment.

Robbie's reaction was exactly what Eddie was hoping for. What he had was compelling and shocking: precisely what he would need if he wanted to sell Jameson on the story.

"I'll see what I can do, but don't get zealous, Eddie. You know as well as I do, Mr. Jameson isn't known for printing stories that could potentially come back to bite him in the ass," said Robbie, cautioning him.

"You're a lifesaver, Robbie: literally. Oh, and if you don't mind, I'd prefer it if we keep the terminal cancer talk between us; I'd rather not be everyone's pity case. I'll come see you before I leave," he said, as he opened

the door and headed toward the elevator.

Now I just have to sell Jameson on the story, he thought, having half his plan in motion.

Linking the murders on the map to form an inverted pentagram was as close to proving the connection between the murders as he could've hoped for. The elevator sounded as the door opened. He walked in, pressed the top floor, and felt a bead of sweat trickle down his lower back. He had forgotten about his headache for a moment, most likely due to the adrenaline he was feeling, and was grateful for the distraction. He clearly wasn't well; he realized he was burning up, and his back was completely soaked as he exited the elevator.

It's probably just the anxiety of it all, he thought, as he tried his best to whisk the sweat away with his shirt before getting to Mr. Jameson's office.

"Good morning, Miss. Brant. How are you doing on this fine morning?" asked Eddie, in the most charming manner he could manage.

Elizabeth Brant was Mr. Jameson's secretary and wouldn't normally allow walk-in visits. Eddie knew the drill; she'd tell him Mr. Jameson was in a meeting and ask him if he'd like to schedule an appointment. He would need to think quickly if he was going to sell Mr. Jameson the story in time for tomorrow's paper.

"Is Mr. Jameson all set for our meeting?" he asked, with a casual smile.

"Meeting? Scheduled for today?" she asked, confused.

"Yeah. Did Mr. Jameson forget to book it with you after he called me?" asked Eddie, slyly.

"He didn't book it in with me, Eddie. No, I'm sorry," she said, as she began looking through Mr. Jameson's scheduling agenda.

While she was going through the schedule, Eddie casually walked over to the office and knocked, looking up at the golden name affixed to the door: J. Jonah Jameson.

"Come in," said a loud, rough voice from within.

Eddie turned and signaled to Miss Brant, giving her the impression that his meeting was still on.

"Brock, I'm not scheduled to meet with you today. What are you doing here?" asked Mr. Jameson, directly, as Eddie came in and shut the door to his office behind him.

"I have a breaking story on a satanic serial killer who goes by the alias Carnage. This marks the fifth rooftop murder scene this year. I linked the

murder scenes by marking them on a map of the city and discovered that when I connected the locations it formed an inverted pentagram. The story's hot and I want to get ahead of it before it's on the six o'clock news. I have a credible lead from a source in the police department who confirmed the details. I've got a damn good visual to catch the eye, a solid headline, and a credible story that I think will sell out if we run it," said Eddie, confidently.

Mr. Jameson studied him, wondering what brought on the sudden change. Brock was as stubborn as they come and normally wouldn't stoop to covering stories like this. Eddie and Mr. Jameson had butted heads over moral principles in the past, due to Brock covering a story that Mr. Jameson considered to be libel.

Mr. Jameson, as hardnosed as he was, liked Brock and wanted to see him succeed, believing he was a good kid. Unbeknownst to Eddie, Mr. Jameson believed he was saving him from committing career suicide. He needed Brock to understand that those kinds of stories and accusations weren't good for his career and certainly wouldn't gain political favor for the Daily Bugle. He respected Brock for standing behind what he believed was right, but just the same, he needed to show him that there were repercussions for going outside the lines.

However, this was a story he could allow him to cover. He felt he had been hard on Brock and took particular notice of how rundown and awful he looked standing there in front of him. Brock fit the physical description of a typical Marine jarhead but was surprisingly sincere and empathetic under the surface. Feeling as though he had punished Brock enough, he waited until he finished going over the details of the story and agreed to let him run it. Eddie was so relieved he almost broke down in tears in front of Mr. Jameson. His head was pounding, and he felt as though he might pass out from the anxiety of the moment. Promising to make good on the story, he left the office pale and soaked in sweat. He thanked Mr. Jameson profusely before heading down to tell Robbie they could run the story.

The door to the laboratory shut as Odo made his way down the corridor to the elevator. The meeting had adjourned; Mr. Osborn and Dr. Parker had departed and were aboard the ferry returning to the mainland.

I could not have hoped for a better outcome, he thought, as he waited for the elevator door to open.

When the door sounded, he tilted the control forward, directing the wheelchair onto the elevator, while one of the appendages on the mechanical apparatus simultaneously moved to press the button to the ground floor as the door closed behind him.

Odo was recently stationed at Ravencroft and had been living on the island full-time since the research laboratories were constructed. He didn't mind his new living arrangements. In fact, he welcomed the change.

Odo grew up on a military base as a prisoner of war; albeit, he had been living on base for so long, many had forgotten that, but he didn't. Following the assassination of Howard Stark, the Department of Defense assumed command of the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency and ceased operations temporarily. The vast majority of the team that developed the Super Soldier Human Enhancement Project were disbanded and reassigned. Nowadays, aside from a few, most were unaware that Odo was raised on base as a prisoner of war, believing him to be one of their own. Those that had just been assigned to the Agency usually assumed that he lived on base out of convenience due to his disability.

Colonel Fury knew my father and of his past ties to the Hydra Regime. He simply doesn't see me as a threat, he thought, rather gratefully.

When Fury proposed the move to Ravencroft, Odo was taken aback, as it was the first time that he had been approved to leave the military base in all the years that he had been held captive. Moreover, it was the first time that he had been approved to leave the base with the mechanical apparatus that the late Dr. Vanko had made for him. Now he had the opportunity to operate outside the confines of the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency for the first time at Oscorp Industries.

It is imperative that I make the most of this opportunity, he thought, as the door to the elevator opened.

Exiting silently, he made his way down the west wing of the building. He had worked extensively over the years to appear helpless in order to deceive his captors, never revealing the full functionality of the mechanical apparatus or his ability to use it. He deliberately concealed the extent of his

skill in operating the device, only showing them the bare minimum of what he could do, fearing they might see him as a threat if they knew the truth. Had he wanted to, he could have used the mechanical apparatus more extensively while working in the laboratory. However, he avoided doing so, as he wanted to remain as unassuming as possible, aware that he already drew much attention due to the nature of the apparatus and its unusual design.

Odo made his way out of the facility and down the ramp to the bus that awaited to escort him to the house he had been posted in. When Colonel Fury informed Odo that he was assigning him to Ravencroft and stationing him to live on the island on a full-time basis, he wasn't sure what to expect. When he left the base that he had been held captive in for the first time since arriving forty-eight years ago, he realized how much he had missed out on in life. Being captive on a base almost his entire life, he had never experienced the vastness of the world. He was completely mesmerized by the beauty of the scenery. The natural surroundings left him utterly transfixed during the trip to the island. He was deeply affected by the experience, leaving a profound emotional impact on him.

When he arrived at Ravencroft, he was delighted to find that there was an old cathedral on the island with gothic architecture and a stunning bell tower that had been constructed in 1882. Odo spent most of his free time there, plotting his grand escape from the Agency, dreaming that he would one day disappear like the wind, never to be seen or heard from again.

He directed his wheelchair up the ramp of the handicap bus. The small bus had been routed specifically for Odo to get to and from Ravencroft. He felt gratitude for the simple courtesy that Colonel Fury showed him, which was more than Howard Stark had ever done. The bus ride was enjoyable and afforded him time to think and scheme, something he was getting exceedingly good at these days.

What an unexpected turn of events. I had not anticipated being assigned to work at Oscorp, he thought, as the bus coiled around the bend in the street.

The roads were steep, making for an exciting ride home. Odo had only ridden in a motor vehicle a handful of times in his life prior to arriving on the island. He could not have imagined being granted access to Oscorp's facility, nor being nominated to work alongside their team.

He wondered how he could get close to Dr. Parker and his team. Richard Parker came across as a down-to-earth person. Odo was certain that he had many questions regarding the design of the mechanical apparatus and how it came to be developed. He could see Dr. Parker's intrigue when the Colonel ordered him to demonstrate the functionality of the device during their brief interaction at Ravencroft.

I can use the apparatus as a way to get closer to him. He will be the key; I must find a way to utilize him for my plan. He has a conscience, a rarity to find in people from my experience, he thought, staring out the window as the bus pulled up to the house he was stationed in.

"Thank you," he said, as the driver lowered the ramp down for Odo to exit the bus.

"You're welcome, sir. See you Monday," said the bus driver politely.

He made his way up the walkway to the house. Colonel Fury had a ramp installed for Odo in place of the stairs leading to the door. The mechanical appendage silently extended and turned the doorknob as he ascended the ramp slowly, feeling the cool wind from the waterfront cut through him. Odo enjoyed the feeling; he felt it to be invigorating and rather refreshing, as his body shook uncontrollably. He wasn't used to the elements; he spent the majority of his youth indoors with little to no exposure to the outside world. His father would occasionally go for walks around the base to stay active and to allow Odo to get some fresh air.

Odo preferred his walking sticks in his youth, rather than a wheelchair. However, as he aged, the more challenging his condition became for him. When Dr. Vanko presented him with the remotely operated wheelchair, Odo could not contain his joy. It was the very first time someone other than his father had given him anything. Howard Stark took no issue with Dr. Vanko creating the wheelchair for Odo, as Vanko used his own materials. He could see the boy's condition was steadily deteriorating and wanted to help him. The wheelchair possessed Vanko's Arc technology, using the first prototype he ever created to power the wheelchair. The wheelchair wasn't sanctioned by Howard Stark, but the prototype Arc Reactor was made by Dr. Vanko before partnering with Stark Industries. Therefore, Stark had no authority over the technology that was used for the chair. There wasn't a day that went by that Odo didn't pay his respect to the late Dr. Vanko for all he had done for him. However, Odo believed the only way he could truly show his gratitude would be to carry out his plan and see it through to the end.

He sat his briefcase down on the table and got up from the wheelchair, using the mechanical appendages to support his body as he sat down on the sofa. The appendage extended, opening the briefcase while the other carefully pulled out a file containing a research article that Richard Parker had written on NeoGenics. Odo hadn't been this excited in some time; the thought of being so close to his goal was overwhelming.

How many people have suffered at the hands of the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency? he thought, as the mechanical appendage retracted, releasing the research article as he grabbed it.

He read through the research article on NeoGenics, making notes

and highlighting key points that he wanted to discuss further with Richard Parker. He was impressed by the brilliance Dr. Parker exhibited in the field of genetics and wanted to know more about the gene editing and splicing techniques he used in order to sequence the spiders' DNA with the human genome.

He had come to realize that Dr. Curt Connors' Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum worked similarly to the Super Soldier Serum his father helped create over fifty years ago. Since then, Odo had taken over his father's research at the Agency. However, neither he nor his father had the level of success their predecessor, Dr. Abraham Erskine, had with the Human Enhancement Project: Captain America.

His colleague at Ravencroft, Dr. Farley Stillwell, was well versed in genetics and known for his fascination with experimenting. Odo had learned a great deal from working with Dr. Stillwell but believed him to be mentally unstable. He had come to the conclusion that Dr. Stillwell was a disturbed individual, perhaps even borderline psychotic. Dr. Stillwell masked his twisted views and lack of empathy for patriotism, believing that because they were serving their country while committing these atrocities, it somehow justified the crimes they were committing.

Dr. Stillwell frequently conducted preclinical experiments and was particularly fascinated by the effects that the administration process had on the subjects. His briefing on the Super Soldier project left him filled with an obsessive desire to conduct clinical trials. He often spoke of his predecessors and the days when there weren't as many sanctions or protocols, which kept them from continuing clinical trials on volunteer soldiers as they had during Project: Captain America.

Odo knew the stories, hearing them firsthand from his father, Arnim Zola, who took part in both the German and American Super Soldier experiments. Odo never met Dr. Erskine; his father worked with him before the war. They had worked together for the German military developing the Super Soldier Serum before his father was recruited into the Hydra Regime.

Odo wondered if Richard Parker had picked up on Dr. Stillwell's odd peculiarities during their meeting at Ravencroft. Their interaction was brief but enough for Dr. Parker to get a sense of the type of person Farley Stillwell was under the facade. Odo had remained unassuming, silently observing their awkward exchange in the boardroom while waiting for the Colonel and Mr. Osborn to return from their one-on-one meeting. Colonel Fury had chosen Odo for the task of working with Dr. Parker and Dr. Connors at Oscorp. The Colonel had done so knowing that Dr. Stillwell wasn't the right fit to work with their team. Odo always got the impression that the Colonel didn't care much for Dr. Stillwell, but the military required men like him to do what was deemed necessary.

The mechanical appendage extended toward the kitchen and opened the cupboard, carefully lifting out a glass and set it on the counter. It moved toward the refrigerator and opened the door, while Odo remained seated on the sofa looking through Richard Parker's research article on NeoGenics. He was able to see the video image through the camera at the end of the appendage that was wirelessly transmitted to the goggles he was wearing. After taking the carton of orange juice out of the refrigerator, he poured himself a glass. Operating the device had become so natural for him he could multitask with it. Odo thought back to when he couldn't imagine using the mechanical apparatus in this manner. There was a time when Odo couldn't focus on anything while wearing the device, due to the discomfort it caused him. Now, there were days he would forget he was wearing it.

He learned to interact and see through the device with the assistance of Dr. Vanko's state of the art wireless goggles. The goggles were designed so the user could see through the cameras that were located at the end of each of the mechanical appendages. They were brilliantly designed, capable of transmitting a wireless live image back to the goggles. The cameras were intended for the user to be able to see what they were doing while operating the appendages from a distance. The image transmitted could be seen in different formats depending on the user's preference. The image could be viewed in the top and bottom corners of the goggles, allowing the user to see from each camera perspective. It was useful in this format, as it didn't obstruct the user's ability to read or multitask when following mechanical blueprints while working on machinery. The image could also be zoomed in or out for the desired viewpoint, or it could be viewed in a full-screen image, allowing the user to focus solely on what was being seen through the camera at the end of the mechanical appendage.

The camera lenses employed at the end of each appendage were specialized military optics, designed to withstand harsh conditions and heavy use, ensuring they remained functional even under extreme stress. The dome cameras featured military-grade impact resistant glass, which offered the highest level of protection against any sort of physical impact. Military-grade advanced lens coatings prevented the lenses from scratches and damage, making them resistant to cracks, dust, and water, while the protective shock absorbent housing prevented damage from any impacts.

The mechanical apparatus was crafted entirely of Antarctic vibranium, being extremely durable and surprisingly light in weight. It also employed the use of Dr. Vanko's trademark sustainable Arc technology. The device connected to the user's cerebral cortex, which connected to various subcortical structures such as the thalamus and the basal ganglia, sending information to them along efferent connections and receiving information from them via afferent connections. Sensory information was routed to the cerebral cortex via the thalamus, which is located above the brainstem,

linking the user to the device neurologically when worn.

However, Stark prohibited the use of the mechanical apparatus shortly after its creation. Odo was initially permitted to use the device under keen observation, but Stark had the apparatus removed from Odo due to his inability to operate the device. The mechanical apparatus was so uncomfortable when Odo first had it integrated into his tissue and anchored to his bone that he was unable to demonstrate its functionality for the team.

The tension between Stark and Vanko had been mounting following their heated argument over the unsanctioned mechanical apparatus that was created for Odo. The argument took place after Odo had first been fitted to demonstrate the functionality of the device and was something he would never forget. He recalled Howard Stark's words to Dr. Vanko that day; his mouth twisted in anger as he moved toward him. His eyes locked on Dr. Vanko, appearing as two flames burning in their sockets.

"Let me get this straight. You made an unsanctioned piece of tech worth five hundred million dollars that was specifically designed for a cripple?" exclaimed Stark, furiously.

Stark was visibly shaking, barely able to contain his rage. Dr. Vanko, clearly caught off guard, tried to entice Stark's curiosity, calmly replying, "It interfaces with the user neurologically. In this case, the apparatus is anchored to the bone and connects through the tissue with the central nervous system. However, the technology can be applied in other ways. I thought the boy's condition was the perfect opportunity to demonstrate the technology."

The incident left Odo shaken, never viewing Howard Stark the same afterwards. His concerns grew following Stark's orders to have the mechanical apparatus physically removed and taken away from him. He tried to voice his concerns to his father, as he began to fear Stark no longer trusted them. Odo's father, Dr. Arnim Zola, believed Stark would forever view the Germans as the enemy, and although he sanctioned their working relationship, he still considered them to be prisoners. His father assured him that Stark was smart enough to know he needed them. However, when Dr. Vanko broke Agency protocol by making the unsanctioned mechanical apparatus for Odo, it created a rift between them, damaging his relationship with Stark severely.

Despite the friction between Howard Stark and Anton Vanko following the creation of the mechanical apparatus that was designed for Odo, they continued to work together for nearly a year developing Project: Cerebro. Stark sanctioned Project: Cerebro after hearing about the mechanical apparatus' capability of interfacing with the user neurologically. Stark requested a prototype with a design that wasn't as physically invasive as the design of the mechanical apparatus created for Odo. To accommodate Stark's request, Dr. Vanko developed a helmet that was capable of interfacing

with the user neurologically. Neural interfaces facilitate communication and control between the brain and external devices, like computers or robotic limbs. During the development of Project: Cerebro, Howard Stark brought in a telepath named Charles Xavier that worked for a different branch of the Department of Defense to trial the newly crafted prototype. They discovered the device had the capability of connecting Xavier's mind with unlinked individuals. Dr. Vanko witnessed the man's extraordinary ability as a telepath firsthand; they were able to use the device to locate and track specific people of interest.

Dr. Vanko came to realize the device would be used to track and spy on individuals, which was not his intention when he designed it. He openly opposed the use of the device for the purpose of espionage, expressing his concerns and voicing that its potential extended far beyond that, feeling the technology was being wasted. When the prototype malfunctioned after asserting his disapproval of what the Agency intended to use it for, it led to allegations that Vanko sabotaged the project. The situation escalated, leading to Dr. Vanko's arrest on accusations of treason. Dr. Vanko died unexpectedly after being imprisoned, from pneumonia due to the cold, damp conditions he was kept in. Following his death, the project was abandoned, as the device could not be repaired. It was never confirmed if Howard Stark's accusations of Dr. Anton Vanko committing treason during the trials of Project: Cerebro were justified.

Odo was devastated. He couldn't bear the thought of the only man, aside from his father, to ever show him kindness being accused of treason and imprisoned over a device malfunctioning. He believed the accusations were a direct result of Dr. Vanko making the mechanical apparatus out of sympathy for him. It broke his spirit for a time and led him to develop a severe hatred toward Howard Stark and the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency following the unexpected death of Dr. Anton Vanko.

Howard Stark typically kept a safe distance from the Germans that were brought over from Hydra. His paranoia that there were traitors amongst the Agency only intensified following the death of Dr. Vanko. He never directly communicated with Odo or his father again after the incident. Odo despised the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency and wanted nothing more than to watch it burn from within. He dreamt that one day, he would devise a plan cunning enough to escape his captivity and collapse the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency permanently.

It wasn't until Colonel Fury assumed command of the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency and recommissioned Project: Cerebro several years later that Odo was sanctioned to wear the mechanical apparatus that Dr. Vanko created for him. The Colonel approved the use of the mechanical apparatus to document its capability during Project: Cerebro's reengineering phase, giving the team the opportunity to observe the technology and its functionality. The

mechanical apparatus was similar in function to Project: Cerebro, as both devices were designed to interface with the user neurologically. Fortunately, Colonel Fury didn't have the same attachment to Arc technology and vibranium as his predecessor, Howard Stark. The Colonel viewed the technology as a previously invested resource. He sanctioned the use of the device on a full-time basis so the technology could be studied, allowing Odo to operate the mechanical apparatus after overcoming the initial discomfort. He was in complete agony the first three months of wearing the device. However, being authorized to wear it on a full-time basis eventually made it bearable, and in time, the mechanical apparatus no longer felt foreign to him. Odo cleverly used his disability to give the illusion of being physically helpless. Colonel Fury overlooked the threat of the tiny, crippled man, allowing him to grow comfortable wearing the mechanical apparatus. Despite his physical disability, he demonstrated an intellect that rivaled that of his late father. Upon his death, Dr. Arnim Zola entrusted all of his project analysis and evaluation to Odo, in hopes that he would continue his research.

When Colonel Fury initially authorized the use of the device, they spent a great deal of time observing what Odo could do while operating the mechanical apparatus. As he became more comfortable wearing the device they began to run a series of experiments. They wanted to understand how the devices software interfaced with the user neurologically, linking through the nervous system. Dr. Abraham Cornelius and Dr. Carol Hines were recruited by the newly appointed director, Colonel Nicholas Fury, and were given the blueprint of the mechanical apparatus that was created for Odo by their predecessor, Dr. Anton Vanko. It consisted of a series of mechanical drafts, technical drawings, and was composed of notes that detailed how the device functioned and interfaced with the user.

They tested Odo's senses while wearing the apparatus without the assistance of the goggles. They had him do a series of tests blindfolded to see if he could feel where the mechanical apparatus was being touched. He could feel through the apparatus to a certain degree, possibly because he was linked to the device neurologically, which was connected through his central nervous system. It was different than his sense of touch, although he had a hard time understanding it himself. He could feel it when they placed their hands on the apparatus. Though he could not feel physical pain when the appendages were struck, he could tell where they were struck without seeing it. However, he kept this from the researchers, afraid they might see him as a threat and take the device away again if he were to reveal its full capability. It also served to slow their progress on the development of Project: Cerebro, giving him more time to master the mechanical apparatus. He was uncertain at the time if the Colonel would continue to let him use the device once they completed the project.

The American scientists, Dr. Carol Hines and Dr. Abraham Cornelius,

were recruited by Colonel Fury to reengineer Dr. Vanko's prototype device, Project: Cerebro. When they successfully completed the task of reengineering the device, Charles Xavier returned to the project and assumed his role. The Agency's initial use of the device was for espionage. However, they discovered the device could be utilized for another purpose, subsequently reassigning Charles Xavier to the highly classified military Project: Weapon X.

Odo was promoted to Head Geneticist and Bioengineer following his father's passing and had been commissioned to resume the Human Enhancement Project. He had also been assigned to work with Dr. Cornelius and Dr. Hines, assisting them with understanding Dr. Vanko's research on smelting and tempering the rare metal, vibranium. During that time, he stumbled upon a sequencing technique while editing the Super Soldier Serum, which led to a series of successful preclinical trials. Following the success of the preclinical trials that were conducted, the Department of Defense unexpectedly commissioned the serum's use for the classified Project: Weapon X.

Dr. Cornelius and Dr. Hines were promptly transferred to a facility in Banff, Alberta, Canada, to work on the project. In October of 1974, while in the final phase of the project, a tragic incident took place, claiming the lives of Dr. Hines and Dr. Cornelius. The incident was quietly covered up, and the project was shut down**.** Consequently**,** the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency has not authorized the use of the Super Soldier Serum for project use since the incident. The Agency's protocol now requires that they submit an application to the Department Policy Board, notifying them that they have conducted a successful preclinical trial. The Department Policy Board then has to submit a clinical trial application to the Department of Defense to have it approved.

Odo eventually learned of Dr. Cornelius and Dr. Hines' passing, though he was never informed of what happened, due to the project being highly classified. He had worked with the two biomechanical engineers regularly and was saddened to hear of their passing. They were brilliant, and he had acquired a great deal of knowledge from working with them. Odo realized that if it wasn't for Dr. Cornelius and Dr. Hines' ability to reengineer Project: Cerebro, he would not have been authorized to operate the mechanical apparatus that Dr. Vanko had designed for him.

When Dr. Cornelius and Dr. Hines were transferred to work at the facility in Banff, Alberta, Canada, on Project: Weapon X, Odo was required to provide a batch sample of the Super Soldier Serum that he had developed. Odo realized the danger of revealing the technique he discovered to the Agency. After providing the sample of the serum he developed, he never used the sequencing method again, fearing it would give the U.S. military the ability to create an army of Super Soldiers should he continue experimenting with the technique. Subsequently, the next batch that was developed and

preclinically trialed was unsuccessful. He realized that he would have to find a way to test the serum without the Agency's involvement. If he could confirm the serum was fit for clinical trials, he intended to take it himself and fulfill his father's dream.

Odo had already well outlived what the doctors had forecasted his life expectancy to reach. The way he saw things, it was a miracle he was still alive. He had nothing to lose at this point. He was already on borrowed time.

Richard Parker is the key to setting this in motion. I know it, he thought, as he glanced out the window at the waves on the shoreline.

Odo had met several megalomaniacs and psychopaths while working for the Agency throughout the years and thought himself to be a good judge of character.

I just need to make Richard Parker aware of what his NeoGenics research is being used for by the Agency and play off his morals in order to bring my plan to the next phase, he thought, flipping through the lengthy research article on NeoGenics.

He didn't like the idea of being deceptive, as he sincerely believed Richard Parker was a good man. However, he realized he would need to be calculated if he wanted to be able to manipulate Dr. Parker for his plan. Odo had come to realize many things over the years. In most cases, he didn't have to try to be cunning: it came out of necessity from living on the military base his entire life. He had to appear helpless and unassuming in order to make it as far as he had, and he would continue to appear that way until he was ready to show them exactly who he was.

He needed to find a way to get close enough to Dr. Parker to alert him to the plans the Agency had for his research in NeoGenics. During their preparation for the meeting with the team from Oscorp, he overheard Colonel Fury asking Agent Dugan about Mr. Osborn's Agency briefing that had recently taken place. Odo didn't believe Norman Osborn was foolish enough to discuss his family business of profiting from war with his hired protégé, Dr. Richard Parker. He intended to use this to his advantage, believing that if Norman Osborn hadn't disclosed what the Agency intended to use Oscorp's NeoGenics research for to Dr. Parker, it could tip the scale in his favor when the time was right. He just needed something compelling enough to cause Richard Parker to blow the whistle on the project. He could inform him of past projects but didn't have anything impactful enough to reveal to him currently. The last time the Agency conducted clinical trials on a human subject was when Odo's father was still alive, and it was too risky to try and leak files pertaining to those experiments.

He wondered what Colonel Fury instructed Dr. Stillwell to do with the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum that Mr. Osborn brought him for their one-on-

one meeting today. They were informed that Dr. Connors had recently sequenced a new batch of the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum at Oscorp. Colonel Fury requested that Mr. Osborn bring a sample of the batch to the meeting today. Odo knew it was simply a matter of time before they were conducting their own experiments at Ravencroft.

He had come to learn that Richard Parker's wife, Mary, worked with him at Oscorp, and that she was Head of the NeoGenics Division. He had also recently discovered that Richard's thirteen-year-old son Peter went to Oscorp's Institution of Academic Excellence. Children were foreign to Odo; he had never been around one to know how to communicate effectively.

There was one person Odo thought he could connect with that might help him get close to Dr. Parker: his partner, Dr. Curt Connors. Odo had learned that Dr. Connors was an amputee, stemming from the Vietnam War. Odo wondered if Connors was like himself, trying to find a solution to his disability.

Could we have the same intent? wondered Odo, suspiciously.

These were all things he would soon come to know, being assigned to work at Oscorp. Establishing a rapport with these two men was instrumental to his plan. He had already come to know Dr. Reed Richards and Dr. Victor Vondume when he was commissioned to help them upgrade the deep-sea submersible vessel. The project was conducted entirely at Ravencroft, with Odo being the leading expert on Arc technology and smelting and tempering vibranium. Odo studied Dr. Vanko's research tirelessly, learning the craft of smelting and tempering the rare metal following his untimely passing.

He sat on the couch staring out the window, contemplating his next move, wondering how he could get closer to the team at Oscorp while still remaining unassuming. Suddenly, the phone rang, startling him. It was a rare occurrence for him to receive a phone call on a Friday evening. He used the mechanical appendages to help lift himself off the couch and sat down in his wheelchair. He took precaution even when in isolation, never knowing who could be watching. He couldn't risk being seen using the mechanical apparatus unnecessarily.

He picked up the phone, curious as to who would be calling him at this time.

"Yes?" he said, with a subtle German accent.

"Dr. Zola, it's Colonel Fury. Sorry to disturb you at this hour. I got caught up seeing Mr. Osborn and Dr. Parker off after the meeting and didn't get a chance to make it down to the lab before you left for the day. As I mentioned in the meeting today, I had a discussion with Mr. Osborn this morning during our one-on-one and would like to have you working with their team on-site at Oscorp four days a week starting Monday," he said.

“Yes, of course, Colonel Fury. I would be happy to work with the team at Oscorp,” said Odo, surprised by how quickly the Colonel was moving on this.

“I’ve arranged to have the bus pick you up and take you to the ferry every Monday. Mr. Osborn has informed me he is able to accommodate your living arrangements at Oscorp. They have guest suites they offer business associates visiting from abroad. You’ll have a private room prepared for you with all the accommodations you require. Naturally, the arrangement will be no different than it has been on the base. You’ll be required to remain on-site at Oscorp for the duration of the week, until Thursday afternoon, when you’ll be picked up and brought to the pier to take the last ferry ride back to Ravencroft. I’d like you to compile the work that’s been conducted at Oscorp during the week so that you can review it here with Dr. Stillwell on Friday. I’m sure I don’t need to remind you that our research and experiments at Ravencroft are not to be discussed with the team at Oscorp. Do you have any questions?” asked the Colonel.

“What time should I expect the bus on Monday morning, sir?” asked Odo, as his mind was still trying to process being on-site at Oscorp four days a week.

“The bus will pick you up at 5:30am on Monday morning to take you to the ferry which leaves at 6am. Be sure to bring whatever essentials that you think you may need. You shouldn’t require much, aside from clothing and your personal belongings. I’ll have someone from the Agency pick you up from Oscorp Thursday afternoon at 3pm to drive you to the pier. The ferry to Ravencroft departs at 4pm,” said Colonel Fury.

“Thank you, Colonel. Understood,” he said, as the reality of it all was sinking in.

Odo hung up the phone and sat there a moment, thinking.

This could not have turned out better if I had planned it myself. I must prepare immediately.

Peter proceeded down the escalator toward the exit, passing through Oscorp's security screening with his mother, while his father waited for them in the car outside the facility. He didn't expect his dad to get back from the meeting at Ravencroft before the Festivities Event ended, but despite that, his night went perfectly.

I couldn't have planned for it go better, he thought, as he flipped through Dr. Reed Richards' paper on the deep-sea expedition into the Mariana Trench, while he waited for his mother to pass through the security screening.

She gathered her belongings out of the tray and said goodnight to Mr. Berkley as they made their way out of Oscorp's Grand Foyer and to the car. She opened the door to the vehicle.

"How was the meeting?" she asked, as she got in and buckled her seat belt.

"It went well, I suppose. Norman seemed pleased. I must admit, the complex was quite impressive. We came to find out when we arrived that the upper half of the facility was built on top of a maximum-security criminal institution," he said, waiting to hear Mary's reaction.

"What do you mean the facility was built on top of a maximum-security criminal institution? Why wouldn't Norman tell you that beforehand?" she asked, confused.

"He said he didn't know anything about the criminal institution. They told us a little bit about it before we started the meeting. Apparently, before the research laboratories and other divisions were built, it was called Ravencroft: Institute for the Criminally Insane. They assured us you couldn't gain access to the upper levels of the complex unless you had the security clearance, which was something we required, even being guests," said Richard, as he pulled the security card out from his pocket.

"Awesome! Can I see it, Dad?" asked Peter, from the back seat.

He gave the card to Mary so she could pass it back to Peter, as he drove. It was still raining lightly, making for poor visibility and slick roads.

"I'm pretty sure Norman is in over his head," he said, glancing over at Mary.

"What makes you say that?" she asked, as she turned on the defogger to help with the visibility.

Peter listened as his parents talked. The streetlights lit the interior of the car for a moment then faded out as they drove past each lamp post, making it difficult for Peter to see the badge.

“Norman just seemed off, like he wasn’t sure what to expect either. He even apologized for the security measures they took after we completed the screening. He genuinely seemed to have no idea they were going to have so many security requirements for us as visitors,” said Richard.

“What did they require?” asked Mary, curiously.

“A retinal scan, facial recognition, fingerprints, the badge, the whole nine yards.”

“That seems rather uncharacteristic for Norman Osborn. Do you think he didn’t know or just didn’t tell you because of how invasive it would have been to request of you himself?” asked Mary.

“I really think he didn't know. He was apologizing right as they came to greet us outside the security gate. I think it’s pretty clear that this partnership is the reason for Oscorp’s upgraded security protocol,” said Richard.

“So what makes you think he’s in over his head?” asked Mary, as she reached over to take the card back from Peter after he had thoroughly examined it.

“Just the overall atmosphere of the place. It felt off. I don’t know; I can’t describe it.”

“Alright, well, give me an example. You’re not painting much of a picture for me,” said Mary, cheekily.

“Well, let’s see... Oh yes, we were greeted by a one-eyed Colonel and his bionic assistant. The other man with them appeared unassuming, but for some reason, he had the most unsettling presence out of the three of them,” said Richard, as he glanced over to see Mary’s reaction.

“Whoa, cool, a bionic man?” gasped Peter, suddenly tuning back into what his parents were talking about.

He was lost in thought, recounting his conversation with Gwen, and overanalyzing their options for next year's marine program specializations. He also couldn’t stop thinking about the possibility of attending the launch ceremony viewing for The Fantastic Four’s deep-sea expedition into the Mariana Trench that was taking place in the auditorium of Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography on Monday.

“What do you mean, bionic man?“ asked Mary, curiously.

“I mean it quite literally. I’ve never seen tech like this, Mary. Sadly, the man’s disabled. He greeted us with the others in a highly advanced

wheelchair. The Colonel explained that the wheelchair wasn't the most impressive piece of tech that the man uses to assist himself around the laboratory, then asked him to show us the device. Suddenly, four mechanical appendages came out from slits in his lab coat. One moved across the room and picked a file folder up off the desk, then retracted back to him. There was no controller used; it was as if they had a will of their own," he said, struggling to explain it.

"So, what are you saying: that he was moving it with his mind? How do you know he didn't have a way of operating the device remotely?" she asked, trying to make sense of what he was telling her.

"I got to ask a few questions before the meeting started, but I didn't get the chance to ask how it operated before getting interrupted. I watched him demonstrate how he used the apparatus before the meeting began, and I can confidently say it's the most advanced piece of technology I've ever seen. It seemed like it may have somehow been interfaced with him neurologically. He wore these weird goggles, but aside from that, I can't figure out how else the device was responding to him," Richard said, still in awe of the technology.

"Really, Dad? Can I meet him?" asked Peter, excitedly.

"He's going to be working with us at Oscorp, so I'm sure you'll get the chance to," said Richard, looking at Peter's reaction in the rear-view mirror.

"Really? That's so cool, I can't wait to meet him," he said, enthusiastically.

Richard smiled as he glanced over at Mary. She turned in her seat, looking at Peter, as Richard stared at her for a moment.

"What is it?" she asked, somewhat thrown off to hear that the disabled man would be working with them.

She could always tell when Richard was uncertain about something.

"Nothing, I'm just trying to process everything. I'm not sure how I feel about my research being used by the military."

"This was always a possibility, Richard. It's not like we're just finding out that Oscorp has a contract with the military. We've known since the acquisition of Trask Industries that Oscorp is a third-party weapons supplier to the military. It was one of the reasons we were so hesitant to sign with them," said Mary, who was always brutally honest with him, which was Richard's favorite quality about her.

"I know. I just never thought they'd find a reason to get directly involved in my research."

"These are things that are out of your control," she said, in an effort

to ease his mind.

"Did you end up seeing Harry during the Festivities Event, Peter?" asked Richard, attempting to change the subject.

"He spent the night hanging out with us," said Peter, looking at the rearview mirror to see his dad's eyes glance up at him.

"Really?" said Richard, rather surprised, as he looked over at Mary.

She seemed just as surprised as Richard, turning to look at Peter.

"I thought you were hanging out with Gwen tonight?" she said, confused.

Unbeknownst to Peter, Mary had snuck out from the laboratory for some fresh air and went to check on him. She watched from the upper level of the Grand Hall and was delighted to see him talking to Gwen. She knew how much Peter enjoyed her company and that she had been his best friend since they were four years old, although Mary secretly believed it would eventually lead to much more than friendship one day. For now, she was happy to foster their friendship and watch them grow together.

"I did hang out with Gwen tonight. It actually worked out really well having Harry there. I was able to talk to Gwen about Dr. Richards' research article on the Mariana Trench without Liz and Betty changing the subject on us every few seconds," said Peter, sarcastically.

"Oh, I was wondering who Liz and Betty were off talking to," said Mary.

"Mom! Were you watching us?" asked Peter, visibly annoyed.

"I just came out for some air and saw you talking to Gwen, that's all," she said, as she turned and smirked at Richard.

"So he ended up hanging out with you after all? Well, I'm glad it worked out," Richard said, as he stared ahead, wondering if it was wise to have taken Norman up on his request for Peter to get acquainted with his son.

"Dad, can Gwen and I come to the launch ceremony that's being held in the auditorium at the Institution of Oceanography on Monday for Dr. Richards' expedition into the Mariana Trench? I kind of told Gwen that we could go together," asked Peter.

"You told her there was a launch ceremony? If you had of been listening while you were eavesdropping, I said the launch ceremony wasn't going to be like the last expedition that got announced to everyone. This is more like a private launch ceremony," said Richard.

"Please, Dad. I want Gwen to see the new upgraded vessel. We're

going to plan out what we want to specialize in for next year's marine program," said Peter, aware that he was pushing it.

"Alright, but this is really last minute, so don't get your hopes up. I'll speak to Reed and see if it would be okay," said Richard, reluctantly.

"You're the best. Thanks, Dad! I can't wait to tell Gwen," Peter said, excitedly.

Mary smiled, knowing the joy it brought Richard to have Peter in the laboratory with them every day, as passionate as he was to learn.

"When is the bionic man coming to work with you and Mom?" asked Peter, who still had plenty of questions for his father regarding the strange man.

"He'll be coming to work with us starting Monday, from what I understand," said Richard.

"Really? That seems somewhat surprising that Mr. Osborn didn't formally announce that he'd be coming to work with us before the meeting," said Mary.

"Norman explained on the ferry ride home that during his one-on-one meeting, the Colonel requested that Dr. Zola start at Oscorp on Monday. It would appear Oscorp and Ravencroft will be working together going forward. It'll make for a busy week considering we have the oceanography team's launch ceremony for their expedition into the Mariana Trench on Monday. Now, I want you to remember to be respectful, Peter. The man is disabled and confined to a wheelchair," said Richard, wanting to ensure that Peter would be as polite as possible.

"That's a shame. Did he mention why he was in the wheelchair?" asked Mary.

"No, but if I had to guess, I'd say he was born that way. It appears he suffers from spina bifida. I still can't get over the mechanical apparatus he was wearing. It was like alien technology, Mary. That's how sophisticated this device was," said Richard, glancing over at his wife.

She studied her husband a moment, knowing it must have been extraordinary tech to have Richard going on about it. Working at Oscorp Industries provided access to some of the most sophisticated technology the industry had to offer.

Peter's imagination was running wild. "I really want to see the bionic man's mechanical arms when he comes to the lab, Dad," said Peter, innocently.

He already had a dozen questions lined up for the man he believed to be half machine.

“You can’t call him the bionic man, Peter. I was just unsure of how to describe him. I said that to emphasize to your mother that he was somewhat mechanical in nature,” paused Richard, glancing over at Mary as she burst out laughing suddenly.

“I’m sorry. I’m not laughing at the poor man, Peter. I’m laughing at your father’s gift for words,” she said, trying to compose herself.

“What was his name, Richard?” she asked, as she pulled the visor down from above her head so she could use the mirror to wipe the tears streaming from her eyes.

“His name’s Dr. Odo Zola. He’s the Head Geneticist and Bioengineer at Ravencroft,” Richard said, as he glanced back at Peter in the rear-view mirror.

They pulled into the driveway of their home and unbuckled their seat belts. Richard turned around and looked at Peter.

“What’s the man in the wheelchair’s name, Peter?” asked Richard, becoming serious all of a sudden.

Peter knew he had to be on his best behavior if he wanted to go to the launch ceremony to see the upgraded submersible vessel with Gwen.

“His name is Dr. Odo Zola. Don’t worry, Dad, I’ll remember his name,” said Peter, as he opened the door to the vehicle and grabbed his backpack and gym bag off the seat.

“That a boy,” he said, relieved that Peter was mature enough to understand the man’s unfortunate circumstance.

He didn’t want Peter to think that he and his mother were making light of the man’s disability. He genuinely didn’t know how to articulate the strange events that he had witnessed. Richard would use humor at times when he was uncomfortable, or in awkward situations. A habit that Peter had inherited from his father, which Mary was quick to point out whenever Peter would get scolded.

Peter walked up the driveway, shielding himself from the rain with his gym bag, and went inside the house. He set his backpack and gym bag down on the floor beside the bench just inside the doorway and sat down to take his shoes off. He was anxious to finalize next year’s marine program specializations, which he and Gwen had planned to do together. He couldn’t wait for his dad to find out if they could go to the launch ceremony on Monday.

Richard and Mary made their way inside the house, shaking off their damp jackets. Peter went upstairs to put his school uniform that was in his gym bag in the dirty laundry hamper. He threw the clothes in the basket and made his way back downstairs to the kitchen. His parents were talking while

Mary began preparing their dinner.

"Dad, can you call Dr. Richards and find out if Gwen and I can go to the launch ceremony? I still have to call Gwen and let her know so she can ask her parents if she can come with us," asked Peter.

As exhausted as Richard was, he knew what it meant to Peter.

"I'll give Reed a call shortly. Just remember, Peter, it's not going to be a big ceremony. The team already had a formal launch ceremony for their first expedition into the Mariana Trench," said Richard, glancing over at Mary as she began washing the vegetables.

"You were saying earlier that Reed mentioned they made some significant upgrades to the vessel," said Mary.

"That's what he told me. We haven't had the chance to talk about it since. I'm curious to see what they did," said Richard.

"That's awesome! Can you find out what they upgraded when you talk to Dr. Richards, Dad?" asked Peter, enthusiastically.

"I'll phone him before we have dinner. Go take a shower and start your homework, Peter," said Richard.

"I'll call you when dinner's ready," said Mary.

"Okay."

Peter made his way upstairs to his bedroom. He wondered what kind of upgrades they could have made to the vessel. An upgrade to a vessel that was already leading-edge technology was hard to imagine. It had barely been a year since they launched the deep-sea vessel that broke the depth record in the Mariana Trench.

Peter hoped one day that he and Gwen could be part of The Fantastic Four. He got undressed and threw his clothes in the laundry hamper. He grabbed his towel, went into the bathroom, and turned on the faucet to the shower. He couldn't wait to see what kind of upgrades they made to the submersible vessel. He wondered why they weren't doing a formal launch ceremony like they did the first time and why it hadn't been announced publicly, especially if they had made upgrades to the vessel.

Peter heard his father coming up the stairs. Richard called down to Mary to say he was going to their bedroom to call Reed before it got too late. He quickly got in the shower, excited to find out if they could attend the launch ceremony on Monday. He could hear his father on the phone talking while he moved as fast as he could, trying not to slip on the tile. He was hoping that he still had time to call Gwen before it got too late. His mother had forbidden him to call any later than 8pm, as she believed it was in poor manners for a boy to be calling past that time of night. Mary wanted to

ensure Peter showed respect for Gwen's parents, knowing how strict her father, Chief George Stacy, could be when it came to his daughter. She knew Peter's intentions were sincere and that he was just excited to talk to her about the launch ceremony for the deep-sea vessel. However, she worried that Gwen's father would now view Peter as an adolescent boy that was reaching puberty.

Peter could hear his father talking in the other room as he dried himself off. He quickly got dressed and sat down at his desk trying his very best to hear what his father was saying. He opened his notebook but couldn't focus on his homework with how excited he was. He sat there for what felt like an eternity, waiting for his father to finish his call with Dr. Richards to find out if they could attend the launch ceremony. He heard the door to his parents' bedroom open as his father made his way down the hall. He heard a light knock on his bedroom door.

"Come in."

His father opened door to find him at his desk pretending to do his homework.

"Launch ceremony is 8am Monday morning. Reed confirmed there isn't going to be an announcement to the public like the last time. I tried asking about the upgrades that were made to the vessel, but he said he couldn't talk about what was done yet. Apparently they're planning to reveal some of the enhancements that were made to the vessel during the launch ceremony. He said you and Gwen are more than welcome to attend, though," said Richard.

"Awesome! That's such great news. Thanks, Dad," said Peter, happily.

Richard smiled. He appreciated how enthusiastic Peter was for the marine biology and genetic engineering program that he was planning to specialize in at Oscorp.

"How come he's not allowed to talk about the upgrades, Dad?" asked Peter, confused by the secrecy.

"I'm not entirely sure. It could be due to the non-disclosure agreement we signed," said Richard.

Peter was looking forward to telling Gwen that they could go to the launch ceremony but struggled to comprehend why they couldn't discuss the upgrades that were made to the vessel.

"Reed invited me to stop by the laboratory tomorrow morning before they fly out to Guam. He said you could come," said Richard, knowing his son would be ecstatic over the invite.

"No way! Are you serious, Dad?" asked Peter, as he jumped to his feet.

“Just to be clear, I don’t want you asking Dr. Richards about the upgrades to the submersible vessel, Peter. He’s not authorized to talk about it yet; I don’t want to put him on the spot. He mentioned he has some new equipment he can show us before his flight to Guam, though,” said Richard.

“Okay, I won’t ask about the upgrades. Can Gwen come too, Dad?”

“I don’t see why not, as long as her parents are okay with it,” said Richard, as Mary called to them that dinner was ready.

“Come on, let’s go eat. I’m famished,” said Richard, as they made their way down to the kitchen.

“What did Reed say about the launch viewing?” asked Mary, as she was setting the table.

“He said they’re scheduled to launch at 8am Monday morning and that we can all attend. He confirmed it wouldn’t be a public launch ceremony like last time,” said Richard.

“Did he say why they didn’t announce that they were doing a launch ceremony?” asked Mary.

“No, he said he couldn’t say much. Although, he mentioned the upgrades were made at Ravencroft, which would explain the discretion,” said Richard.

“Ravencroft? He never said anything to you about it before now?” she asked.

“No, he never mentioned it. They practically began working on the upgrades to the vessel right after they won the Award for Ocean Exploration. I’ve just been so caught up at the lab that we haven’t had time to talk like usual,” said Richard, in Reed’s defense.

“You two are usually so close. I’m surprised he never mentioned that he was working with the team at Ravencroft,” said Mary.

“Well, keep in mind, we signed a non-disclosure confidentiality agreement when Oscorp’s military contract and security were upgraded. He was probably informed that it’s classified technology and was most likely told not to speak of it. I’m telling you, Mary, this place was like nothing I’ve ever seen when it comes to security. I really can’t emphasize enough the level of technology I witnessed. You’ll see for yourself; Dr. Zola will be at Oscorp on Monday,” said Richard.

Mary was thrown off by how intense Richard seemed to be after the meeting at Ravencroft. She knew it must have been extraordinary to have left such an impression on him.

“Mom, can I call Gwen after I’m finished eating?” asked Peter.

Mary looked at the time; it was ten minutes to eight. She knew how excited Peter was to tell Gwen that they could attend the launch ceremony on Monday, and Gwen still had to ask her parents if she could go.

"Alright, hurry up then. You can call if you make it quick. No longer than a five-minute call, Peter," she said, sternly.

"Thanks, Mom!" said Peter, as he scarfed down the rest of his food.

He placed his plate in the dishwasher and ran upstairs, grabbing the phone off his desk. He dialed Gwen's number hoping her father wouldn't answer. Peter always got nervous calling Gwen; he had a healthy fear of Chief Stacy, who was an intimidating man of English descent with a large stature in comparison to his father. Luckily for Peter, Gwen's mother answered the phone. He made sure to be as polite as possible, just as his mother had instructed him when speaking with Gwen's parents.

"Good evening, Mrs. Stacy. May I speak with Gwen, please?" asked Peter.

Fortunately for Peter, Helen Stacy wasn't as strict as her husband, and she always liked Peter. She knew how fond Gwen was of him, being that the two had been friends since they were little.

"Certainly, dear. I'll go get her," she said, as she put the phone down and went and knocked on Gwen's bedroom door.

"Gwen, Peter's on the phone," she said, as her daughter jumped to her feet.

"He is? Okay, thanks, Mom," she said, as she picked the telephone up off her night table.

She was surprised to hear from him so soon; she hadn't even been home for two hours.

"Hello?" she said, curious to hear what news Peter had for her already.

"Hey, Gwen. I have good news about the launch ceremony: we can go!" said Peter, trying not to sound too excited.

"Really? What time are they doing it?" she asked, as her mother could be heard picking up the phone downstairs before hanging it up.

"The launch ceremony is 8am Monday morning. You'll need to get permission to get out of class from your parents," said Peter, hopeful that Gwen's parents would allow it, being extracurricular and related to her school program.

"Why didn't they announce it?" she asked, worried that her dad might not allow it on such short notice.

"I'm not really sure why they didn't announce it, but there was a huge upgrade that was made to the submersible vessel that they're not allowed to talk about until the launch ceremony," said Peter, trying his best to entice Gwen's curiosity.

"My dad's not home from work yet. I'll ask my mom; hopefully she can convince him to let me go on such short notice. I just think he'll wonder why they never made a formal announcement for the launch ceremony like they did last time. He might think it's suspicious," she said, knowing her father all too well.

"You can tell your mom that she can call my parents if it helps. I'm sure they'd have no problem explaining it to your dad if he has any concerns," said Peter.

"Alright, I'll ask my mom first to see what she thinks. I'll let her know they can call your parents," said Gwen, somewhat doubtful.

"I have one more surprise before I go. Dr. Richards invited me and my dad to go to the Oceanography lab tomorrow morning before they fly out to Guam for the expedition into the Mariana Trench. Dr. Richards told my dad he couldn't talk about the upgrades that were made to the deep-sea vessel, but apparently he has some new equipment that he can show us. I asked my dad if you could come, and he said he didn't see why not, as long as your parents agree," said Peter, waiting to hear Gwen's reaction.

"Tomorrow morning? That's so soon, Peter. You know I would love to, but I doubt my dad will let me go on such short notice," she said, somberly.

"I thought it might be a long shot, but ask your mom to talk to him if you can. I just found out that there's going to be a new scientist working with my dad starting Monday. He met him at the meeting he went to today with Mr. Osborn. His name is Dr. Odo Zola. He's the Head Geneticist and Bioengineer at Ravencroft, which is a high security military base on an island. What's even stranger is that my dad said that he was a bionic man," said Peter, in barely a whisper.

"Really? What do you mean, bionic man?" asked Gwen, thrown off by the sudden change of topic.

"My dad made me promise not to call him that, so if we meet him, we have to make sure to address him by name, or my dad will kill me," said Peter.

"Alright, what was his name again?" asked Gwen, confused.

"His name is Dr. Odo Zola. He's a military scientist from Ravencroft. It's probably best if you don't tell your parents about this. That's just for you to know. I'll tell you more about what I heard my dad say when I see you. For now, let's just keep that between us," cautioned Peter, wisely.

“Yeah, sure. You definitely have me curious now,” said Gwen.

“I can’t wait to tell you more about it. I’ll let my mom and dad know to expect a call from your parents,” said Peter.

“Okay, I’ll run it by my mom after we get off the phone. Before my dad comes home and it turns into an interrogation,” she said, sarcastically.

“Okay, good luck,“ chuckled Peter, hopeful that Gwen would at least be allowed to go to the launch ceremony on Monday.

“Thanks. Bye, Peter.”

“Bye, Gwen.”

He hung up the phone and made his way downstairs. He found his parents curled up on the couch together, watching the evening news. He sat down on the reclining chair next to the sofa, kicking his feet up as the chair swung back. They were both silent as the news anchor reported on the recent murder victim found on the rooftop of an apartment duplex.

“Peter, did you finish your homework?” asked Mary, as she turned to look at him.

Richard changed the channel, knowing that Mary didn’t want Peter to hear about the murders that had taken place in the city. They did everything they could to shelter their only son from the harsh reality of New York City.

However, Peter already heard about the brutal killings that had taken place over the course of the year. It had become a topic of interest at school amongst the students. They would regularly ask Gwen if her dad had any leads or possible suspects, regardless of how many times she told them that her father didn’t discuss his work with her.

“Alright, I’ll go finish it, Mom,” said Peter, as he leaned over and tilted the leg recliner down so he could stand up.

He went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water. He was aware that his parents didn’t like him watching the news or seeing any sort of violence for that matter.

“Did you talk to Gwen?” asked Mary.

“Yeah, her dad wasn’t home from work yet; she said that she was going to ask her mom if she could try and talk him into letting her go. She was worried that he might find it odd that they didn’t receive a formal announcement like the last time they had a ceremonial launch viewing from the Institution of Oceanography’s auditorium. I told her if he had any questions, he could call, and you or Dad could explain it to him,” said Peter.

“Yes, well, Chief Stacy is a suspicious man,” said Richard, sarcastically.

“He certainly is,” said Mary, smirking at Richard.

“Would you mind taking the call, sweetheart?” asked Richard, already knowing his wife’s answer.

“You were the one invited. You have all the details for the launch ceremony. I plan on going to the lab Monday morning, not the Oceanography auditorium,” said Mary, as she poked Richard.

“Looks like your mother’s leaving me with the phone call from Chief Friendly,” said Richard, humorously.

Peter smiled and put his glass in the dishwasher.

“I’m going to do my homework. If Chief Stacy calls, can you let him know that Gwen’s been invited tomorrow too, Dad?” asked Peter.

He was tired; he hardly slept last night due to his excitement for the after-school Festivities Event. He was looking forward to going to the lab tomorrow to see what equipment Dr. Richards was going to show them.

“Sure, Peter, I’ll let him know. It’ll just be for a couple of hours tomorrow,” said Richard.

They said goodnight as he made his way upstairs to his room. He figured the faster he got his homework done and got to bed, the sooner tomorrow would come. He turned on his reading light and sat down at his desk. He didn’t have a lot of homework to do; he was able to complete most of it while in class. He finished his homework and stretched out, yawning tiredly. He got up, pulled the blanket back, and got into bed. He lay there for a while thinking about the bionic man and all the technology his father spoke of, wondering if it would be as spectacular as he claimed it to be. Not long after, he was sound asleep. Later that evening, his mother came upstairs. Seeing that he was in bed sleeping, she turned his reading light off and shut the door to his bedroom.

The following morning Peter woke to the sound of his mother making breakfast. He rubbed his eyes and stretched out looking at his alarm clock to see what time it was. It was half past seven; he had slept in later than usual on account of being so exhausted. He kicked the covers off and rolled out of bed. He went into the bathroom to wash his face and brush his teeth. He wiped his face with his towel, put his slippers on and went downstairs. He could smell the breakfast cooking as soon as he opened his bedroom door. He walked down the hall and made his way downstairs.

“Morning, sleepy head,” said Mary, as she was cutting up the green pepper and red onion.

“That smells good, Mom. What’s for breakfast?” asked Peter.

“I’m making omelettes for breakfast. Did you wash up?” asked Mary.

“Yes, Mom,” said Peter, sarcastically.

“Good, this will be ready in ten minutes,” she said, as she threw the cut-up vegetables in the frying pan.

Peter heard the shower go on upstairs in his parents’ room.

“Is Dad showering before breakfast?” asked Peter, as Richard would usually eat breakfast and shower afterwards.

“I told him to shower before breakfast in case Chief Stacy called this morning,” she said, as she was cracking the eggs.

“Oh, okay. I guess Gwen was right when she said he probably wouldn’t let her go today,” said Peter, disappointedly, as he began to set the table.

“As much as I adore Gwen, I cringe at the thought of talking to her father,” said Mary, bluntly.

Peter was used to his mother’s unreserved manner. He walked into the foyer, opened up the front door to the house, and grabbed the Daily Bugle newspaper off their front porch. On the front page of the paper was a map of the city that had five dots with lines connecting them to make an inverted five-pointed star. The dots on the map were the locations of the murder sites that had taken place over the course of the year. Peter stared at the photo, shocked by the discovery.

The headline read, “New York City’s Satanic Serial Killer ‘Carnage‘ Strikes Again!”

A serial killer who calls himself, Carnage? I wonder if this is why Gwen’s dad hasn’t called yet? he thought, as he walked back into the kitchen and set the newspaper face down on the table so his mother wouldn’t see it.

He finished setting the table and sat down as his mother put his omelette on his plate. Richard came downstairs with his glasses in his hand. They had fogged up from him still being hot from his shower. He pulled a microfibre cloth out from his pocket and began to clean them.

“That smells delicious. Thank you, love,” he said, as he put his glasses on and sat down at the table, turning the newspaper over. He paused for a moment as he read the headline.

“I knew they were linked,” he blurted out,

Mary glanced over as she was setting the omelette on Richard’s plate.

“Jesus, they really know how to sell a story,” she said, looking at the inverted five-pointed pentagram.

Peter sat there anxiously eating his breakfast, hoping to hear from

Gwen before they had to leave. He knew it wasn't likely that Chief Stacy would let Gwen go on such short notice, especially if he was in a foul mood from work. Gwen told Peter things about her personal life that she didn't share with Liz and Betty. She had revealed to him that her parents often argued due to her father's drinking. She explained that her mother would defend him, saying that his job was difficult and stressful, which led him to drink. Nevertheless, Gwen would hear them arguing over it on a regular basis and would sometimes talk to Peter as a way to help her cope with the absence of a father figure. Peter felt sorry for Gwen; Chief Stacy often put his job before his family, which hurt Gwen and her mother. Peter felt fortunate to be so close to his parents. They both had demanding jobs but were privileged to be able to bring him to the lab each day after his classes.

They finished their breakfast and left for Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography. His mother stayed behind at home, assuring Peter she would speak with Gwen's parents if they called about Monday's launch ceremony viewing. Peter was disappointed that Gwen's father hadn't called, but they couldn't wait any longer.

"How could he not let her go when it means so much to her?" asked Peter, as his father pulled out of the driveway.

"I don't know, son. He probably had a rough night at work by the sound of the newspaper article I read this morning," answered Richard, honestly.

"It's not fair. Gwen deserves to go more than anyone, considering how high her grades are," said Peter, feeling frustrated.

"I agree, Peter. Hopefully she'll be allowed to go on Monday," he said, trying to keep Peter in a positive frame of mind for their visit with Dr. Richards.

He turned on the windshield wipers as it began to drizzle.

"I'm jealous that Reed is getting away from this rainy weather, even if it is for work," said Richard.

They arrived at Oscorp and parked the vehicle in the underground parking lot after checking past the vehicle inspection security gate. They made their way into the Grand Foyer and went through the security screening, completing the stringent process with the talkative Mr. Berkley, whom Peter had known for as long as he could remember.

"I see here in the log that Dr. Richards has you two scheduled for a visit this morning," said Mr. Berkley, with a smile.

"Yep! We're going to see all the cool equipment they have at the Institution of Oceanography. I'm planning to do an internship under Dr. Susan Stoarm-Richards and the team, The Fantastic Four," said Peter,

enthusiastically.

"It sounds like you have it all sorted out, young man. I wish I had half the smarts when I was your age," Mr. Berkley said, glancing up and smiling at Richard as he put his hand on Peter's shoulder.

"See you later, Mr. Berkley," said Peter, as he turned and walked away with his father.

"Alright, young man, enjoy yourself. I'll see you later," said Mr. Berkley.

They made their way through the Grand Foyer and headed towards Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography, which was situated on the bottom level at the south end of the building. Peter was excited. He hadn't had a chance to speak to Dr. Richards since his team won the Award for Ocean Exploration, which felt like a lifetime ago. Peter knew his time to speak with Dr. Richards this morning would be brief; he was only at the lab to gather his equipment for his flight to Guam.

"It was extremely gracious of Reed to invite us here today, knowing the amount of pressure he must be under," said Richard, as they walked down the hallway toward the Institution of Oceanography.

"You think he's under pressure, Dad?"

"Well, not now, but he will be in about forty-eight hours," said Richard, nudging Peter, to see if he caught the pun.

Peter smiled, shaking his head in response to the silly joke.

"Do you think Dr. Richards gets nervous before going on a deep-sea expedition?" asked Peter.

"I'm sure he gets a little bit nervous; it's only natural. There are a lot of things that can go wrong when you're at sea. Reed is as professional as they get, and his top priority is the safety of his team," said Richard, confident in Reed's expertise and leadership.

They passed through a series of small labs before entering the main laboratory, where they found Dr. Richards gathering his things.

"Good morning, Dr. Richards," said Peter, barely able to control himself from running over to him.

"You made it. That's great," said Reed, with a smile, as he put the dive goggles down on the table in front of him and walked over to shake Richard's hand.

"You can hang your jackets up inside my office. There's a coat rack in there," said Reed.

Peter was so excited he was sweating and had to take his sweater off

to hang with his jacket.

"I appreciate you taking the time for us today, Reed," said Richard, sincerely.

"Don't mention it, Richard. It's my pleasure. I know how much Peter loves to hear about the expeditions we go on," said Reed, as he turned and put his hand on Peter's head.

"I really do love hearing about your expeditions, Dr. Richards. My friend Gwen wanted to come today too but couldn't make it. She's at the top of our class and wants to do her internship at the Institution of Oceanography, like I do," said Peter, mesmerized by the presence of his hero.

"You'll have to bring her for a visit next time. I don't have much time this morning, but I gathered a few things here to show you before I head out for my flight," said Reed.

"That sounds great, Dr. Richards," said Peter, enthusiastically.

"Take a look at these goggles. Now, at first glance, these may look like a normal pair of dive goggles, but I assure you, these goggles are comprised of leading-edge technology. I'll be honest, I personally don't like the bug-eyed look of these dive goggles. They sent us a few different demo suits to choose from, so I asked the team at Ravencroft if they could send us a few types of goggle designs to see what the team preferred. The team went with a single lens design, thankfully. Although, as much as I detest the look of the lenses, these are military-grade dive goggles," said Reed.

"That's so cool!" said Peter, as he tried to get a better look at the goggles Dr. Richards held up.

"The team at Ravencroft sent us the most sophisticated semi-drysuits I've ever seen. They took my measurements when Victor and I were there drafting the new design of the deep-sea vessel with their team. They sent us three demo suits with different looks to select from a few months ago that are truly cutting-edge. They sent some additional pieces of the demo suit fabric to help us select the thickness of the suit, giving us the option between a two-millimeter, three-millimeter, or four-millimeter suit. We decided to go with the two-millimeter-thick suit. The demo suits they sent us were two millimeters thick, and after trying them on and seeing how comfortable they were, it was an easy decision, especially after reading about all the tech that went into making the fabric. It's extremely uncommon to find a semi-drysuit that thin, yet so warm and waterproof. They also sent some accessories that go with each demo suit, such as, detachable dive socks, gloves, and ice hoods," explained Reed.

"What are ice hoods, Dr. Richards?" asked Peter, curious to know more so he could tell Gwen.

“Ice hoods are detachable and can be worn over the semi-drysuit hood. We received a matching ice hood for each demo suit. Ice hoods cover the majority of the face, similar to a ski mask, having small eye openings and a small mouth opening for the breathing tube, which were made to accommodate us when we’re diving in colder water,” said Reed.

“That’s good news, I always find the water to be extremely cold whenever I go diving,” said Peter.

“I would have liked to test them in the cold water, but I was told the demo suit fabric hadn’t been sealed for testing in the water yet. They sent us some of the sealant to apply to the demo suits in case we wanted to test them in the water, but I never got around to it. I’ve been so busy, the jars of sealant and suits have just been sitting here in a suitcase. Apparently, once the patented military sealant is applied, the suit becomes pretty much resistant to everything and is basically indestructible. The demo suits were only fitted for me, so I had the thankless job of modeling them for the team,” said Reed.

“Which I’m sure they thoroughly enjoyed,” said Richard, humorously.

“Fortunately, they only sent us three demo suits, each having a different pattern design and color scheme to choose from. The team chose the light blue and black suit with white trim. I preferred the red and blue one, but at least they didn’t settle on the plain solid metallic blue one that would just look black in the water. They’re in a suitcase in my office beside my desk. Peter, would you mind going and grabbing it for us?” asked Reed.

“Sure, Dr. Richards,” said Peter, excitedly.

He went into Reed’s office, finding the briefcase tucked away between the desk and the wall.

“Is this it, Dr. Richards?” asked Peter, as he held up the briefcase.

“That’s the one,” said Reed, as Peter walked over and handed him the case.

Reed opened the suitcase, pulling the contents in it out onto the table.

“Well, what do you think?” asked Reed, as he held up one of the demo suits.

“That’s so cool,” said Peter.

“They even added the number four on the chest of the suit as our emblem, representing the nickname the Scientific Times gave the team. Although, after this expedition into the Mariana Trench, they’ll have to change it to a five to include Dr. Vondume. They sent a pamphlet detailing the technology that was used to create the gear they sent us. I’ll read it so

you understand just how sophisticated this military tech is. I don't want to sell them short. I still can't get over the technology that was used to create these suits and goggles," said Reed, as he took the pamphlet out of the briefcase, while Peter listened attentively, wishing Gwen was there.

If the gear they sent Reed and the team is anything like the tech I saw from the meeting at Ravencroft, they'll be getting quite the upgrade, thought Richard, as Reed began to list the specifications that were outlined in the pamphlet.

"The goggles are made with a curved HD lens, which provides better light transmission, allowing for better clarity and enhanced, unobstructed peripheral vision in a low-light atmosphere. These goggles are military-grade, anti-fog, leakproof lenses. The polarized dive goggles feature an enhanced anti-fog technology that can ensure clear vision and protect the wearer's eyes from glare. The special polarized lenses provides eye protection against harmful UV rays, restores true color, and eliminates reflected and scattered light. The polycarbonate lenses are resistant to cracking and cannot be deformed. It has an adjustable split head strap, made of the same material as the semi-drysuit for comfort. An ergonomic nose bridge, which provides excellent suction to ensure non-slip coverage that is designed to fit a wider range of face shapes. They have a soft and flexible silicone rubber gasket, which is extremely durable. The cured silicone rubber is heat resistant up to 450°F/232°C and is suited for adhering to metal alloys. The three-dimensional double seal metal alloy frame provides an excellent fit as the silicone rubber gasket molds to the wearer's face, acting like a vacuum seal that is water resistant. The memory metal used is a stainless, non-corrodible alloy which is lightweight, and more resistant than conventional memory metals. The advanced memory metal frames feature technology allowing them to be flexed, bent, or twisted and return to their original shape. The silicone rubber is waterproof, tear resistant, and exhibits little to no long-term deterioration. Molds made with this silicone rubber can last up to a hundred years without deteriorating. These military-grade dive goggles are virtually indestructible," said Reed, as he handed a pair of goggles to Peter and another pair to Richard to examine.

Peter was fascinated by the tech that was used. He inspected the goggles thoroughly, then tried them on and looked around the laboratory.

"These are remarkable, Reed. It's hard to believe so much tech went into a simple pair of goggles. Although, I'm not surprised after visiting Ravencroft myself. I'm curious to hear about the design of the demo suits as well," said Richard.

"I thought the same thing; it's one of the reasons I wanted to read you the pamphlet and show you the gear. It's incredible how much went into the design of these goggles and suits. I knew you'd appreciate the intricacies,

especially after visiting Ravencroft and witnessing the technology," said Reed.

Peter handed the goggles over to his father after thoroughly inspecting them. Richard placed them on the table in front of Reed as he began to read the suit specifications from the pamphlet.

"The semi-drysuit is a military-grade, two-millimeter thermodynamic hooded full suit that zips up horizontally across the chest and under the armpits, with a flap of material that folds down over the non-corrodible waterproof zipper. It comes with detachable dive socks, gloves, and an ice hood, utilizing a specially made military fabric called IntelFiber technology. It's a next-to-skin fabric mixture of naturally occurring thermo-reactive minerals that are integrated into the fabrics, yarns, and textile fibers. This technology converts your body heat into infrared energy for greater warmth when diving. IntelFiber is a next generation material that uses enhanced heat-retaining minerals to maintain warmth in extreme conditions. The infused brushed hollow fibers agitate the air particles trapped between your body and the suit, enhancing heat. IntelFiber consists of natural, bioceramic minerals that transmits infrared light. It traps and converts body heat, reflecting it as infrared energy. The IntelFiber-ThermoDynamic fabric and patented sealant contain rubber silicon oxide, quartz, copper, and titanium oxide particles integrated into polymer fibers. The semi-drysuits are woven with IntelFiber fabrics which can be activated by body heat conduction, convection and radiation and remit the energy as far infrared radiation back into the body. The thermodynamic semi-drysuit features a military-grade, next-to-skin fabric that acts as a liner, remaining breathable and whisking away moisture from the body while outside the water. Once the patented sealant is applied to the suit, it becomes incredibly resilient, making it waterproof, flame resistant, rip-proof, tear-proof, dirt-proof, and stain-proof. It's specially designed, having copper woven in the fabric as well as in the patented sealant, making it resistant to viruses and bacteria. It kills any foul smells or odors and prevents stains from penetrating into the fabric. It can even protect against harmful radiation."

"That's so cool!" blurted Peter, unable to contain himself, thinking he couldn't wait to tell Gwen about these new semi-drysuits and goggles.

"You were saying you haven't tried any of the demo suits out yet?" asked Richard.

"No, I've been so busy in preparation for the expedition that I didn't get around to it. When we completed the upgrades to the vessel, I focused on trying to finish writing the research article on our last expedition into the Mariana Trench. I wanted to get that done before going on this one, which was extremely demanding. We were working around the clock on the upgrades to the submersible vessel at Ravencroft. I was the only one that was fitted for the demo suits and was told the suits still needed to be cured with

the sealant. I just didn't have the time to do it all myself. I'm not sure why they didn't cure and seal them for us beforehand. It may have been so they could still make modifications to the suits if we wanted to request anything else before testing them, but I was told that once the sealant is applied to the fabric, the suit becomes virtually indestructible. Thankfully, once we picked the goggle and suit design we wanted, the team got fitted and they sent us our own suits that had been properly cured and sealed. I'll get to try my new suit out for the first time during the expedition on Monday," said Reed, proudly, as he glanced over at Peter who seemed intrigued by the technology.

"This is amazing, Dr. Richards! I've never heard of this kind of technology being used for underwater diving," said Peter, enthusiastically.

"Well, in all fairness, Peter, neither have I," chuckled Reed.

"The equipment is truly remarkable, Reed. Although, as I said, I'm not surprised after my meeting at Ravencroft," said Richard.

"Indeed. I wish I could say more. I'm sure you understand after being there yourself," said Reed.

"Have you heard we're going to have some visitors from Ravencroft working with us starting next week?" asked Richard, curiously.

"Yes, I heard Dr. Zola will be joining the NeoGenics Division. I must say, Richard, he's amongst the most intelligent men I've ever met in my life. Don't let his disability mislead you. The upgrades to the submersible vessel would not have been possible without his remarkable ingenuity," said Reed.

"We were introduced during the meeting at Ravencroft. We didn't have the opportunity to talk much, but I don't doubt that at all, based on the brief encounter I had with him. He seemed fascinating, to say the least," said Richard.

"He's the Head Geneticist and Bioengineer at Ravencroft. He'll undoubtedly be of significant benefit to your research," said Reed.

"Gwen's going into the Marine Mechanical Engineering Program at Oscorp. Will bioengineering be a part of her program, Dr. Richards?" asked Peter, fascinated to know more about the mysterious bionic man and his position at Ravencroft as Head Geneticist and Bioengineer.

"No, Peter. A marine mechanical engineer designs, operates, and repairs the mechanical systems and machinery on ships and other watercraft. Bioengineers, like Dr. Zola, are trained in both biology and engineering fundamentals, including elements of electrical, mechanical, and computer engineering, materials science, and chemistry," said Reed.

"Can I ask Dr. Zola more about it when I meet him, Dad?" asked Peter.

"I'm sure he'd be happy to tell you about what he does as a bioengineer, Peter," said Richard.

"Gwen and I are striving to maintain the highest grade average we can so we get accepted into Oscorp's Marine Internship Program under you and your team: The Fantastic Four," said Peter, enthusiastically.

"That's great to hear, Peter. You can tell Gwen she'll be in high demand as a mechanical engineer. She could even have a career in the military, contributing to the design, construction and repair of military vehicles and equipment. Oscorp's program will prepare her well for a career in marine mechanical engineering. We have a number of modern, well-equipped labs, simulators, and a large teaching machine shop that permits students to apply the theory they learn with practical experience. Oscorp's Marine Engineering program teaches students how to respond to mechanical and electrical defects and failures while at sea. Student cadet interns studying marine engineering at Oscorp learn crucial, hands-on operational skills, such as rapidly diagnosing equipment problems, executing repairs, and maintaining various vessel systems, such as pumps, piping systems, hydraulic power systems, steam propulsion, and electrical systems, while operating and maintaining propulsion and auxiliary machinery. I could go on and on about our marine program here at Oscorp," laughed Reed, embarrassed by how passionate he was getting about the marine program he and the team had put together for the students at Oscorp.

"It's a phenomenal program that you've put together, Reed. Gwen and Peter will be lucky to land an internship at Oscorp under you and the team," said Richard, aware of how passionate Reed was about the marine program they developed at Oscorp.

"Thank you, Richard. I can't take all the credit, though. Dr. Vondume helped create the marine engineering program and has also created an exceptional robotics program. The robotics program integrates electronics, mechatronics, and real-time simulation to advance the development of sophisticated robots guided by electronic and computer programming. If Gwen were to specialize in robotics, it would open doors to careers in mechanical engineering across sectors such as virtual reality, artificial intelligence, manufacturing, defense, communications, imaging, and medical robotics," said Reed, as he checked the time.

"I can't wait to tell Gwen about all the amazing things she'll learn in her program," said Peter.

"I hate to cut our visit short, but I have to head out if I'm going to catch my flight. I appreciate you stopping by today to see me off, Peter. You'll have to come by again when I get back. I'll tell you all about the expedition," said Reed, as he smiled warmly.

“Really? That would be so great! I would love to hear all about the expedition. Umm, Dr. Richards, before you leave, could you sign these two copies of the research article you wrote on your expedition into the Mariana Trench for me and Gwen, please?” asked Peter.

“Certainly, Peter. I’d be happy to,” said Reed, flattered by the request.

“Thank you, Reed. I appreciate your time this morning; it means the world to Peter. Good luck with the expedition. Be safe out there,” said Richard, as he shook Reed’s hand.

“We’ll be back before you know it,” said Reed.

They left the lab as Peter admired his signed copies of Dr. Richards’ research article on their expedition into the Mariana Trench. They made their way through the security gate and said goodbye to Mr. Berkley.

They were on their way home in the car discussing the highly sophisticated military dive gear that Dr. Richards had shown them when Peter suddenly realized, “Dad, I forgot my sweater in Dr. Richards’ office.”

“It’s fine, Peter. I’ll let Reed know that you left it in his office. We can pick it up when he gets back from the expedition,” said Richard.

Reed Richards

Norman stood in the auditorium at Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography in front of the small audience in attendance. He walked up to the podium as the group took their seats. The large screen above him displayed the oceanography team live on board the docking ship in Guam, while they stood in front of the camera crew waiting for the ceremony to begin. A ceremonial vessel launching is a formal, traditional event that takes place, celebrating the first time a vessel is launched into the water, which up until this expedition often involved a public celebration as a blessing for good fortune.

"Oscorp was a small family business that began in 1832; it has since evolved into something exponentially greater. Each generation has transcended the next, elevating the company to what it has become today. I'm thankful for the team we have, which has brought Oscorp to the forefront, revolutionizing marine science and engineering. I'd like to welcome Mr. Fantastic himself, Dr. Reed Richards, to say a few words before the launch," said Norman.

The small crowd laughed at the nickname given to Reed by Mr. Osborn. He started to refer to Dr. Richards as "Mr. Fantastic" after the team received the Award for Ocean Exploration and was dubbed "The Fantastic Four" by the Scientific Times magazine. The audience at Oscorp applauded as Reed stood with the team on the docking ship broadcasting live from Guam.

"Thank you, Mr. Osborn, for the kind introduction. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography. Thank you for taking the time to join us while we're here in Guam on this special day. This expedition wasn't announced publicly, which means those in attendance were personally invited to the launch ceremony. I believe I can speak for the rest of the team as we stand here today in Guam, grateful for the opportunity to undergo what will undoubtedly be the greatest achievement of our careers. I'd like to thank Colonel Nicholas Fury for the opportunity to work with his wonderful team at Ravencroft. Without their ingenuity and expertise, we could not have achieved such a feat. Last year, we did the unthinkable: descending to a record-breaking depth in the Mariana Trench that no one thought was possible. This year, we plan to explore the cave systems with an upgraded submersible vessel; having utilized a non-corrodible metal alloy and Arc power supply. We have a refined multi-beam sonar for seafloor mapping, which will also be used to map the intricate cave networks for future exploration.

I'd like to take a moment to extend my thanks and welcome Dr. Odo

Zola to Oscorp. His experience and expertise were paramount to the upgrades that were made to the vessel, which could not have been achieved without him. We also made use of the non-corrodible metal alloy and Arc technology to upgrade our autonomous vessel, deep-sea sampler, and remotely operated vehicle. These vehicles will be used to enter the cave networks which was previously impossible due to a limited power supply. These shortcomings have been addressed thanks to the technology provided by the team at Ravencroft. I'd like to welcome my partner, Dr. Victor Vondume, to the podium to say a few words before we launch," said Dr. Richards.

"Thank you, Dr. Richards," said Victor, as he nervously set his speech down on the podium.

Some in the scientific community believed Dr. Vondume lived in the shadow of Dr. Richards, but those that worked with the team knew otherwise. Victor was passionate about marine engineering and helped design the submersible vessel. However, during their last expedition into the Mariana Trench, he worked above sea as their command-control operator, monitoring the vessel from the docking ship. As a result, he was not recognized with the team when they received the Award for Ocean Exploration. The scientific community only gave recognition to the team that risked their lives to break the depth record in the Mariana Trench. This hurt Victor deeply and nearly broke the team up, even though they appealed the Marine Society for Underwater Technology's decision to exclude him. The ruling was declared; recommendations are given by the prize-awarding institutions, which determine final selections. Victor glanced up at the video camera as he stood on the deck of the docking ship, unable to see those in attendance.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for joining us today from Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography. I'd like to start by saying what an honor it is to be part of this team and this historic expedition. Working on this project has undoubtedly been the pinnacle of my career. It means so much to me to be able to mentor the next generation of brilliant students following in our footsteps at Oscorp. I'm extremely proud of the program we've designed for Oscorp's Marine Mechanical Engineering graduates. Promising prospects can be anticipated at Oscorp's Institution of Academic Excellence, due to significant investments in areas such as oceanic exploration and unmanned submersible vehicles," said Victor, as he glanced up and flipped the page, his hand visibly shaking as he continued.

"Deep ocean navigation and exploration is dark, dangerous, and incredibly challenging work. The harsh, corrosive environment presents hostile conditions and crushing pressures that severely challenge mechanical engineering design. Here in Guam, thirty-six-thousand feet beneath the surface of the ocean in the Mariana Trench, the pressure from the water is

eight tons per square inch, which is about a thousand times the standard atmospheric pressure at sea level. To put that into perspective, that's the equivalent of one-hundred elephants standing on a person's head. We've had countless advancements in deep-sea engineering in recent years, ranging from deep-sea manned submersibles to fiber-tethered-under-ice vehicles. Other key advancements for submergence vessels are cameras, sensors, controllers, syntactic foam, software, control systems, and pressure-rated materials. Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography is constantly testing the boundary of innovation. We're a research institution that is pushing things to the limit and designing the first of its kind to advance scientific oceanic research. Deep-sea ocean exploration depends greatly on robotics. Often operating in complete darkness miles below the ocean surface, robots have become key pieces of equipment that optimize vessel operation and safety. Whether they are remotely operated or entirely autonomous, robots gather vital scientific data and material samples. These new upgrades have been superbly designed to resist water and pressure. Exterior sensors attached to the hull can take continuous readings of oceanic conditions for extended periods of time. Technology advancements are currently driven by a combination of hardware, software, and everything in between. All the pieces must come together to reach the depths of the Mariana Trench.

Designing equipment to withstand the extremely harsh environment of the deep sea was a huge challenge that could not have been accomplished without the brilliant team at Ravencroft. The highly resistant non-corrodible metal alloy and Arc power supply upgrades the team at Ravencroft provided have significantly improved our ability to explore the ocean depths. Aside from the cold, dark, high-pressure environment, communication to the topside docking ship can be extremely difficult, and absolutely vital for a smooth mission. When operating high-tech robotic vehicles, the nature of the environment such as under ice or in complex cave networks does not allow the use of conventional cables, or tethers, to control the robots. Other methods of communication and navigation used in air, such a radio waves, satellite navigation, and GPS, won't work under water. Instead, we rely on inertial navigation systems, which are self-contained navigation devices that determine a vehicle's position, orientation, and velocity by tracking changes in motion from a known starting point, without relying on external signals**.** Marine engineering technicians at Ravencroft are responsible for the significant improvements made to the equipment and communication structures aboard the submersible vessel. Furthermore, I'm very proud to announce that I will be joining the team aboard the submersible vessel today for our second expedition into the Mariana Trench. Thank you," said Dr. Vondume.

The crowd in attendance at Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography rose to their feet and began to applaud, giving Dr. Vondume a standing

ovation. Many in attendance knew rightly that he deserved the same accolades that the rest of the team had received. The team stood aboard the docking ship that had taken them out to sea which carried the submersible vessel on board to the drop point. Reed shook hands with some of the crew and his colleagues before preparing to board the vessel. Peter sat there, watching the big screen with his signed copy of the research article that Dr. Richards wrote on the team's previous expedition into the Mariana Trench. Dr. Vondume joined the rest of the crew to take a team photo before they embarked.

"Are you ready to make history?" asked Reed, as he put his arm around Victor's shoulders for the photo.

Victor smiled, "I'm ready."

Reed was considered to be the team leader by the group but didn't consider himself to be their superior. He knew they were each brilliant in their own right, and had it not been for Victor's self-absorbed tendencies, he could have easily filled the role of team lead. Victor was charismatic and well-spoken, often receiving praise from his colleagues. When he wasn't considered for the Award for Ocean Exploration along with the rest of the team, it brought out a different side of Victor, creating resentment towards the others. He detested the name the Scientific Times magazine gave the team, dubbing them The Fantastic Four. He took it personally when they accepted the name. He was clearly the fifth member and played a significant role on the team. Albeit during the last expedition, he worked above sea as their command-control operator, monitoring the submersible vessel. His qualifications included being the remotely operated vehicle technician, as well as being the chief marine engineer of the deep-sea submersible vessel.

The breaking point for Victor was when the team still accepted the award. He insisted that it was fine, and that it didn't bother him. However, it secretly ate at him, consuming what was once his life's passion.

Victor was visibly sweating as they prepared to board the submersible vessel. He wasn't shaking from being nervous to speak to the attendees at Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography; he hadn't been in a submersible vessel with the team in over five years and had never been on an expedition of this magnitude. He stood there quietly in his thoughts, wondering if he had made the right decision while everyone was talking amongst themselves. Reed noticed that Victor seemed uneasy and tried to break the tension.

"It's been a while since you've been in the depths. Just remember, it's no different than the simulation program. We'll be back to the surface in no time," said Reed, reassuringly.

Victor nodded, realizing Reed could sense he was anxious and was trying to comfort him, which annoyed him. It was another blow to his pride

that his anxiety was apparent to Reed. They had already arrived at the drop point before broadcasting the ceremonial speech to those in attendance at Oscorp. The docking crew began to prepare to lower the deep-sea vessel into the water. Photos were once again taken as the team prepared to board the vessel. Norman insisted they document everything for historical purposes. His family's history was displayed in photos, paintings, and published news articles all over Oscorp, like a museum.

Before lowering the vessel into the water, the docking ship's crew tested the equipment that had been provided by Ravencroft while viewing the maps of the seafloor and cave networks that were taken during the team's last expedition. They lowered the vessel through what was known as the splash zone, which was the transition from air to water when lowering heavy burdens into the sea. This had the docking ship's crew on edge, as the overall efforts applied on the crane change dramatically when the load begins to touch the water, up to the point where it is completely submerged. Its buoyancy reduces the static mass that the crane has to support but contact with the waves creates widely fluctuating dynamic forces, which can be dangerous.

The chief helmsman and co-helmsman, who were the main pilots of the submersible vessel, entered first, followed by the rest of the crew. Jonathan Stoarm, the youngest of the team, was a brash individual that annoyed Victor. Jonathan was still a junior engineer but had more seniority and experience as an ROV pilot, outranking Victor while onboard the vessel at sea. Victor was the remotely operated vehicle technician, assisting Jonathan with operating the ROV's manipulators, cameras, tether cable, and other tools to perform underwater tasks like inspections, repairs, or sampling. He continuously monitored the ROV's systems, including thrusters, cameras, sonar, and manipulators, for any anomalies or issues during expeditions. Off the vessel, Victor held the higher rank, being the team's chief marine engineer.

Dr. Richards and the team submerged successfully as Victor's heart pounded uncharacteristically. The Naval engineers at Ravencroft equipped the docking ship with a multibeam sonar system to monitor and assist the team during their dive from above the surface. However, there is often surface interference that disrupts communication. The ocean surface is dynamic, with waves, currents, and other phenomena that can interfere with radar signals. This made it difficult to obtain consistent and clear images of the ocean floor, even with the upgrades.

Once submerged, the team would need to rely on their own sonar imaging to navigate through the depths of the Mariana Trench. The team ran a series of command checks as they were now descending into the depths of the ocean with the deep-sea submersible vessel disconnected from the docking ship. Victor's heart rate was elevated; he began using breathing

techniques he trained for while descending.

“You ready to rock and roll?” asked the youthful Jonathan Stoarm, while smirking at his partner, Dr. Vondume.

Victor didn’t have the patience to entertain the young man, ignoring the question outright. He wasn’t sure why he felt so uneasy; he had been on numerous expeditions with the team in the past but never felt like he did now. As the team descended into the depths they maintained operational communications with the docking crew on the surface. After nearly four hours into their descent, they approached the Mariana cave networks as they observed and recorded several deep-sea species of aquatic life.

Dr. Susan Stoarm-Richards identified and recorded each species they encountered during their descent. Her objective was to locate rare creatures and retrieve living samples that could be stored in their newly developed pressurized containment chambers, which could be brought to the surface. The infamous Mariana snailfish, otherwise known as Pseudoliparis swirei, was the deepest recorded fish from their last expedition, found at eight thousand meters below the surface of the Mariana Trench. These translucent creatures feast on tiny crustaceans and shrimp, clustering in groups, as they glide along the ocean floor.

The deep-sea submersible vessel used enhanced side-scan sonar systems provided by Ravencroft to acquire information about the surface of the seafloor. Swath bathymetric systems measured seafloor topography, seismic sources mapped the underlying geologic structure, and single beam echosounders mapped the depth at a point beneath the vessel.

Ben informed the docking ship that they had arrived at their destination and would now attempt to enter the cave network using the remotely operated vehicle. They had last received communication from the docking ship more than two hours ago and received no response from the crew. However, it was standard protocol to continue reporting, as it was well known that at this depth it was extremely difficult to maintain communication with the surface.

“Alright, you’re up, kid,” said Ben, glancing back at Jonathan.

''Aye-aye, Captain,” said Jonathan, as he released the remotely operated vehicle from the hub and steered the vessel toward the unexplored cave network.

The remotely operated vehicle was connected to the deep-sea vessel by a strong fiber optic cable. At 3 mm in diameter, it possesses a tensile strength of more than 650 kg, and its density nearly matches that of seawater. It relied on a physical connection, known as an umbilical cable, that was tethered to the vehicle to transmit power, video, and data signals, ensuring reliable operation while at great depths. The tether also provided a

stable means of visual communication, which was crucial in underwater conditions where radio waves are absorbed quickly by water, making wireless signals ineffective for long-range underwater use.

During their last expedition they discovered a large opening into the cave network that they believed could be explored with the upgraded ROV. It was extremely dangerous to send a tethered ROV into the cave system at that depth. However, it was a straight passage that was wide enough to be explored. Tensions ran high as the ROV slowly descended into the cave network. Jonathan piloted the ROV while Victor was in charge of the tether management system. His responsibility was to lengthen and shorten the tether so the effect of cable drag where there are underwater currents is minimized, and in certain situations, it could be used as a winch to recover the vehicle. The umbilical cables were spooled onto the tether management system which managed the tether, so it wouldn't become tangled or knotted.

"Let's get some eyeballs on the cave entrance," said Victor, as he monitored the drag of the tether.

"I'm on it, partner. Descending to ten thousand meters," said Jonathan, switching the overview camera and backup lights on.

They entered the mouth of the cave as Jonathan cautiously maneuvered the ROV into the unexplored cave system. The team was tense, as this was the most dangerous part of the mission; one mistake could be catastrophic. The ROV made its way through the cave network as they came across a cluster of strange-looking creatures. Jonathan panned the camera down and slowed the vessel.

"What are those?" asked Jonathan, seeing the strange creatures moving in the sediment as they passed over them in the cave.

"Those appear to be Chondrocladia lampadiglobus, also known as ping-pong tree sponge. They're a carnivorous sponge that have hook-covered spheres to catch prey. Small crustaceans get stuck to the ping-pong shaped balls and then absorbed and slowly eaten alive. If it's possible, lets see if we can retrieve one of the smaller specimens," said Susan, excited by the encounter.

Jonathan slowed the remotely operated vehicle until they hovered above the alien-looking creatures, keeping the vessel steady while Victor controlled the sampler arm. He managed to scoop the smallest specimen out of the group of creatures into the container where it would be stored in the deep-sea vessel's pressurized containment chamber. They had a number of containers prepared and enough room in the deep-sea vessel to collect several specimens.

They journeyed anxiously through the darkness for what felt like an eternity, exploring the depths of the cave when they unexpectedly

encountered two small glowing lights in the distance. They slowly approached, trying to get close enough to see what it was on the video monitor. Suddenly the glowing objects began to move towards them, slowly becoming visible in the overhead spotlight of the remotely operated vehicle. Susan watched the monitor attentively, trying to make out what she was seeing as the creatures approached the ROV.

"Those are a species of deep-sea Anglerfish. They've never been recorded in the cave networks of the Mariana Trench before. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised; they're not strong swimmers. Rather than actively pursuing prey, they prefer to lie in wait and ambush unsuspecting fishes and crustaceans. They're usually dark in color, which helps them blend in with the dark environment, using their bodies to camouflage themselves from potential predators in the depths. They have large heads and enormous mouths filled with sharp teeth, which are adaptations for capturing prey. Deep-sea anglerfish have a bioluminescent lure on their heads to attract prey in the darkness of the deep ocean; that's what we saw glowing before they got spooked and started swimming. When a morsel comes close, their big jaws, and sharp teeth snap shut," said Susan, excitedly.

"We're on a roll," said Reed, smiling at Susan, knowing how happy she would be to retrieve another specimen.

As the two fish attempted to swim past the remotely operated vehicle, an odd-looking substance that seemed to be on one of the anglerfish unexpectedly detached from the fish and suddenly changed its shape, appearing to morph into a jelly fish. The strange creature began to swim away from the vessel as the team watched in amazement on the monitor.

"What the hell is that?" asked Jonathan, turning to see a confused look on Susan's face.

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like it before," said Susan, glancing over at Reed.

"You mean this is an unknown species we got on camera right now?" asked Jonathan.

"It's definitely unknown. I'd have to review the footage, but it appeared to come off the anglerfish. Perhaps it's parasitic in nature," she said, as she studied the movements of the strange creature.

"Do you think we can catch up to it?" asked Reed.

"It doesn't seem to move very fast; I'll try and get closer without spooking it. Victor, I'll keep the camera on it; you extend the robotic sampler arm as we're moving past it and see if you can scoop it up into the open container," said Jonathan.

"I'll do my best," said Victor.

Victor extended the robotic arm that held the open container while Jonathan steered the remotely operated vehicle as close to the cave wall as possible, giving the creature nowhere to go. They approached the creature as it swam along the cave wall. Jonathan accelerated when they got close, as Victor pressed the locking mechanism, sealing the strange creature in the container.

"Got it!" said Victor, as a bead of sweat trickled down his forehead.

The team cheered enthusiastically. Reed turned and looked at Susan proudly, knowing what this meant to her as she inspected the creature in the container curiously.

"That is one unique-looking invertebrate. If I had to name the species right here on the spot, I'd call it the Klyntar," said Jonathan, humorously, slowing the ROV to a stop while observing the creature in the video monitor.

"What do you think, Reed? We've been down here a while now; maybe we shouldn't push our luck. It's been a hell of an expedition," said Ben cautiously, who usually didn't say much, but when he did, he was heard.

"I think you might be right," said Reed, as he turned and looked at the rest of the team.

Everyone agreed as Jonathan maneuvered the remotely operated vessel and proceeded to exit the cave network.

"This'll probably win us another Award for Ocean Exploration from the society of underwater technology," gloated Jonathan, glancing over at Victor, who was focused on retracting the tether.

"I think we're more likely to win the Ocean Census Species Discovery Award this time around to be honest," said Reed, glancing over at Susan as he smiled and winked.

The living specimens held in the containment chambers would remain unaffected, as the containers were pressure-retaining, made of vibranium with quartz viewing ports designed and developed at Ravencroft. The containment chambers were designed to replicate the Mariana Trench at a pressure of sixteen-thousand pounds per square inch. Decompression can affect organisms recovered from great depths in two ways, expanding their interior gas volumes, and destabilizing the membranes enclosing their cells. It was a risk to try and depressurize deep-sea creatures; there have been species known to survive decompression, though it usually resulted in the death of the organism.

The team had managed to capture a deep-sea hatchet fish during the last expedition. However, after attempting to decompress the fish, its swim bladder, which is a gas-filled organ used for buoyancy, was hanging out of its mouth due to the expansion of this organ with decompression. It was not

clear whether the deep-sea invertebrate they had managed to capture had any gas-containing structures inside its cells.

Victor's face was soaked. He used his finger to wipe the sweat dripping from his brow, struggling to see with his eyes stinging. He was sweating more than usual due to the anxiety of the situation and for reasons he couldn't quite understand. Regardless, he remained focused on completing the task he was assigned. This discovery would change everything, and he would finally get the recognition he longed for and rightly deserved. Jonathan maneuvered the ROV out of the cave and made it back to the vessel, while Victor carefully retracted the tether. Now they had to transfer the containers from the ROV that were holding the ping-pong tree sponge and strange unidentified species to the submersible vessel's containment chambers.

They had been approaching the seven-hour mark in the depths and had a four-hour journey back to the surface. Victor was exhausted, but executed the task flawlessly, successfully transferring the containers holding the creatures to the containment chamber. All that remained was to secure the remotely operated vehicle, which was a separate assembly attached by a tether that mounted on top of the submersible vessel magnetically. Electromagnets were utilized, passing an electric current through a coil of wire, which generated a magnetic field when the current was flowing. By switching the current on or off, they could turn the magnet on or off, effectively releasing or securing the ROV to the vessel's hub.

Reed and Victor had debated the design of the remotely operated vehicle and how it would be secured to the submersible vessel. Reed was concerned that using electromagnets to secure the remotely operated vehicle to the submersible vessel could potentially interfere with the magnetometer, which was a device that was used to identify cave networks and map the seafloor by detecting variations in the earth's magnetic field caused by magnetic materials in the seabed.

Electric and magnetic fields describe the spatial distribution of a force which can act upon electric charges and currents. Electromagnetic fields can be generated artificially but also occur naturally in the environment. They belong to non-ionizing radiation; in the case of static and low-frequency fields, the electric and the magnetic components are considered separately. With high-frequency fields, the two components are closely interrelated and are referred to as electromagnetic fields. Low-frequency electric and magnetic fields can produce electric fields and currents in the human body, while high-frequency electromagnetic fields can heat up biological tissue.

Victor switched the electromagnet on to secure the remotely operated vehicle to the vessel. The magnetic force attracted the ROV,

securing it to the submersible vessel, but as it locked to the vessel, something anomalous happened.

"You feel that? It feels like a static charge," said Jonathan, as he turned to Victor, whose face trickled with sweat.

Victor felt hot, as though his body was burning up while the energy flowed around him. The combination of an electric field and a magnetic field at ninety degrees to each other allowed energy to be transmitted through the fields along and outside the wires, causing electricity to discharge an electric current across a gap in a circuit. It was sustained by the presence of a thermally ionized column of gas called a plasma.

Generally, atmospheric air is a poor conductor of electric current. However, the submersible vessel's life support system had mixtures of gases and pure oxygen in breathing equipment used in the enclosed habitat that caused unforeseen forces to take effect.

An electrical arc flash unexpectedly discharged as Victor shot back in his chair, screaming. Startled, the team turned to see Victor reeling in pain, clutching his face. The power flickered for a moment before restabilizing.

"What happened? Help him!" shouted Susan, as tears began to stream down her face uncontrollably.

Jonathan unbuckled his safety harness and went to aid Victor as he screamed in agony.

"Jonathan, has the remotely operated vehicle been secured to the vessel?" asked Reed, unfastening his safety harness as quickly as possible to check the extent of Victor's injury.

The sickening scent of burnt flesh lingered throughout the cabin of the vessel as Jonathan checked the rig to make sure they were clear to move.

"It's secure," said Jonathan, as he went back to check on Victor, who had passed out from the intense pain of his injury.

His face was charred black, and his skin had been severely burned. Reed checked his pulse and retrieved the first aid kit to clean his face and apply a cooling pack to the burn.

"Ben, get us to the surface," said Reed, seeing the severity of the wound while cleaning Victor's face.

"I'm on it," said Ben, releasing the ballast weights, which allowed the vessel to rise to the surface of the ocean.

They began to ascend. Reed checked the control panel of Victor's workstation. The panel was fried, but the rest of their operating systems appeared to be functioning, leaving him confused.

“Did anyone see what happened?” asked Reed, trying to remain calm and control the situation.

“I didn’t see anything other than a flash,” said Jonathan, as he sat on the vessel floor beside Victor.

“Me neither,” cried Susan, shaken from the incident.

“I didn’t see anything, Reed. I was focused on the monitor, watching that thing in the containment chamber move around,” said Ben, who felt ill from the overwhelming smell of smoke, soot, and burnt flesh that was trapped in the small cabin of the submersible vessel.

Time was of the essence; it would still take several hours to make their ascent to the surface. Reed was concerned that high temperatures from whatever fried the control panel of Victor’s workstation could have degraded or destroyed electrical insulation materials, leading to further short circuits or malfunctions.

“Susan, come take over. Hold the cooling pad for me,” said Reed, as he got up and returned to his position to co-pilot the submersible vessel to the surface.

He couldn’t afford to leave anything else to chance as they made their ascent to the surface. Victor’s pulse was stable, but Reed knew the injury was severe and would leave him permanently scarred. Ben continued to try and reach the docking ship’s command and control team on the surface, to no avail.

“Mayday, come in. We have a team member injured. Do you copy?” said Ben, frustrated by the inability to assist in the situation.

He looked over at Reed, who was still trying to calculate the error, wondering where they went wrong. Minutes felt like hours as they continued to try and make contact with the docking crew on the surface. Finally, after three hours and forty-six minutes, they broke the surface. Fortunately, the docking ship had been able to track their ascent as they got closer to the surface. However, it still took over two hours to retrieve the crew from the water and the docking station crew several more hours to retrieve the deep-sea submersible vessel.

The coast guard was contacted, and a helicopter was dispatched to the coordinates of the docking ship’s position. When the coast guard arrived, they airlifted Victor to a U.S. Naval hospital in Guam. Susan sat there with a blanket wrapped around her while tears streamed down her face, as Reed and Jonathan sat there comforting her.

Ben anxiously paced the cabin, unable to sit still after piloting the vessel for what felt like an eternity. Reed sat there silently, wondering what could have been the cause of the accident. However, he was so exhausted

from the stress of the incident, he couldn't think. His only thought was that his friend and team member's life would never be the same. They docked in Port Apra and boarded a private jet, where they were taken to Ravencroft to be medically examined.

"Sir, the oceanography team from Oscorp has been retrieved. They're in the infirmary being examined as we speak," said Agent Dugan as he stood in the doorway of the Colonel's office.

"I'll be with you in a moment," said Colonel Fury, closing the classified document and setting it on his desk.

The agent closed the door and stood outside the office. The Colonel joined him a few minutes later.

"Do we know what happened yet?" asked the Colonel, as they made their way to the infirmary.

"Sir, the team was questioned on the flight to the base. Though it's still not clear what caused the incident, we believe, based on the statements we've taken from the team, that the injuries sustained by Dr. Vondume were caused by an electrical arc flash," said the agent.

The Colonel looked into the retinal scanner and pulled his access card attached to a lanyard on his belt, scanning the access panel to open the door.

"The team's ROV pilot, Jonathan Stoarm, claims he felt a static charge and saw a flash of light just before the incident occurred," said Agent Dugan.

They entered the infirmary and approached Ravencroft's Chief Medical Officer.

"What do you have for me, doc?" asked the Colonel.

"Sir, we've conducted a thorough examination of the team. Aside from non-medical shock due to a response to fear, anxiety, and stress from the incident, they appear to be in excellent physical condition," said the doctor.

"Do we know the extent of the injuries sustained by Dr. Vondume?" asked the Colonel.

"Sir, we've reached out to the Naval hospital in Guam that is caring for Dr. Vondume. They informed us that he has suffered third-degree thermal burns that have affected the skin and underlying tissues of his face. It will likely lead to significant scarring and disfigurement," said the doctor.

"I want a full inspection report done on the vessel when it arrives. We need to understand what happened," said the Colonel, as he turned and made his way out of the infirmary.

"Yes, sir. I'll have the Naval engineers on standby to inspect the vessel the moment it arrives," said Agent Dugan.

Colonel Fury walked through the hall of the infirmary and made his way back to his office. He sat down at his desk and picked up the phone.

"Get me Norman Osborn on the line," he said, as he waited for his Chief Administrative Officer to put the call through.

"Colonel Fury, Mr. Osborn is on line one," said the Chief Administrative Officer, as the Colonel reached over the desk and pressed a button on the phone to connect the call.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Osborn. I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time," said the Colonel.

"Good afternoon, Colonel Fury. Not at all."

"I'm calling in regard to the accident that occurred during the expedition yesterday. I was informed that one of the team members was severely injured and was air lifted to a Naval hospital in Guam. I arranged for a private jet to fly the remaining team members back to Ravencroft. I'd like to have the team medically evaluated here at our infirmary as a precautionary measure and get an official incident report on record of what happened. I'd like to fly you out this afternoon if your schedule permits. You can check in with the team, and we can discuss things further," said Colonel Fury.

"Yes, of course, Colonel. I appreciate that. I'd like to see the team as soon as possible. I was notified of the incident yesterday. The docking ship's crew informed me that Dr. Vondume was airlifted to a Naval hospital by the coast guard after surfacing. I'll have my secretary reschedule my meetings this afternoon," said Norman.

"Excellent, I'll dispatch a helicopter to retrieve you," said Colonel Fury, ending the call.

The nurse caring for the team wheeled a cart in with food and set the tray down in front of Reed as he lay in bed recounting the incident. He was exhausted but couldn't sleep, wondering what could have caused the electrical arc flash that burned Victor's face so horribly. He was angry with himself for not foreseeing the mechanical faults that may have been the issue. Though he still wasn't certain of the cause, he speculated it was the electromagnets that were used to secure the remotely operated vehicle to the submersible vessel.

Dammit, Victor, I wish I never agreed to use those bloody electromagnets, he thought as he wiped the tears from his eyes.

Reed blamed himself for not being more adamant regarding the use of the electromagnets. He knew deep down it was a risk but allowed Victor to persuade him. He felt guilty over the Society for Underwater Technology and Marine Technology Society's joint decision to deny Victor from receiving the Award for Ocean Exploration. He also felt regret for accepting the name

the Scientific Times magazine gave the team, calling them The Fantastic Four. This all played a factor, allowing it to cloud his better judgment, as he felt at odds with Victor as a friend and partner.

A strong leader would have stood firm, he thought, pushing the tray of food away in disgust.

He felt as though he failed the team, although things could have gone worse. He knew they were lucky to have made it to the surface alive. His immediate thoughts were to resign, believing he was no longer fit to lead the team. He closed his eyes, praying that this was just a nightmare that he would wake up from, but he knew it wasn't. He knew his friend would wake up today and his life would never be the same again.

The helicopter touched down on the landing pad at Ravencroft. Norman was greeted by Agent Dugan as the helicopter door opened. He wondered what course of action the Colonel wanted to take regarding the accident that took place during the expedition. Norman wasn't particularly close with Dr. Vondume but knew the incident would significantly hurt the team. He was also aware that it would damage Oscorp's reputation, and losing a team member would weaken their Institution of Oceanography. Victor was a brilliant man and a valuable asset to the company; it would be difficult to replace someone of his expertise.

"Welcome back, Mr. Osborn," said Agent Dugan, as he shook Norman's hand.

Norman felt nauseous, uncertain whether it was the helicopter ride or the situation.

"Thank you, Agent Dugan."

"Please, follow me. The Colonel's expecting you," said the agent, as he led Norman up the steps and through the security checkpoint.

Norman followed silently as the agent led him down a series of hallways. They passed through several access points that he had not gained admittance to on his previous visit.

"Has the team been medically discharged?" asked Norman.

"I believe they've been examined. They didn't appear to suffer any visible injuries from the incident," said the agent.

"Are you bringing me to see them now?" asked Norman.

"I'm sure you'll be permitted to see them after your meeting with the Colonel," said Agent Dugan, respectfully.

They approached the Colonel's office, stopping at his Chief Administrative Officer's desk. She picked up the phone upon seeing Agent Dugan and Mr. Osborn.

“Colonel Fury, Mr. Osborn is here to see you,” she said.

Norman wanted a drink. He felt like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. He had just met with the Colonel for the first time last week and didn’t anticipate meeting again under these circumstances.

“The Colonel will see you,” she said, as the agent nodded and proceeded to escort Norman to the Colonel’s office.

Colonel Fury opened the door to his office to greet Norman, shaking his hand firmly.

“Mr. Osborn, welcome back. Please, come in and take a seat,” said Colonel Fury.

“Can I get you gentlemen anything else to drink?” asked the Colonel’s Chief Administrative Officer, setting a fresh pot of coffee on the table with some ice water as Norman sat down at the table.

“No, thank you,” said Norman, anxiously.

She smiled politely and took her leave, shutting the door behind her as Norman shuffled uncomfortably in his seat.

“It’s unfortunate we have to meet like this,” said Norman.

“Indeed, it is rather unfortunate. Although it’s been my experience that if something can go wrong, it usually will,” said the Colonel.

“Any word on Dr. Vondume’s condition?” asked Norman.

“I’m told he suffered third degree thermal burns,” said the Colonel.

He sat there a moment, gauging Norman, then stood up to pour himself a cup of coffee.

“I spoke to Ben Grimm’s fiancée personally this morning. She reached out distraught that he hadn’t contacted her yesterday. I assured her that he was fine and that we were just holding him as a precautionary measure. Do you intend to discharge the team soon? I’m sure they’re anxious to get home after everything they’ve been through,” said Norman.

“They’ll be discharged as soon as they’re able to give an incident report of what happened during the expedition. We can’t have them speaking about the accident to anyone. We had them sign a non-disclosure agreement when we upgraded our contract, but I’ll need their assurance that Dr. Vondume’s condition remains undisclosed for the time being. I ordered the docking crew to bring the submersible vessel to Ravencroft. I want a full inspection done on the vessel so we can determine the cause of the accident. Aside from the unfortunate incident that took place, the expedition was extremely successful. I was informed the team recovered two different species from the expedition. Supposedly, one is an unknown species of

invertebrate that's never been documented on record before. They're currently being held in the vessel's containment chambers. I commissioned my team to prepare two large, pressurized containment chambers to house them when they arrive," said the Colonel.

"Yes, I was informed that they had retrieved two living specimens from the expedition. Although, I wasn't aware that one of the specimens was an unknown species," said Norman, thrown off that the Colonel had made the decision to hold the newly discovered species at Ravencroft without discussing it with him first.

"The species will likely garner a fair bit of attention from the scientific community that we should avoid until Dr. Vondume is out of the hospital," said Colonel Fury.

"I agree. It's unfortunate that the discovery's been overshadowed by the accident," said Norman.

"It is unfortunate, but when we go public, I want the focus of the expedition to be on the new species that was found, not the accident involving Dr. Vondume," said the Colonel.

"Did the medical staff give a timeline for Dr. Vondume's release from the hospital in Guam?" asked Norman.

"No, but I'll have him transferred here as soon as he can make the trip. I'll arrange for a therapist to counsel the team and give them some time off. I'm sure there will be some post-traumatic stress from the incident. We'll wait to go public with the new species until we understand the severity of Dr. Vondume's condition. In the meantime, we'll conduct research on the newfound specimen. I'd prefer it if the oceanography team were to operate out of Ravencroft for the time being. We have the pressurized containment tanks being built. When they're fit to return to duty, they can begin to conduct their research on the new species here," said the Colonel.

"I understand," said Norman, again thrown off by the decision.

"Good. We'll be in touch," said the Colonel, as he stood up and shook Norman's hand.

He opened the door to find Agent Dugan standing there, waiting. Norman turned to Colonel Fury before leaving.

"I'd like to see Dr. Vondume as soon as we're able to transfer him here," said Norman.

"Of course, I think it's imperative that we show concern and support the team. We'll be in touch. Agent Dugan, escort Mr. Osborn to the infirmary," said the Colonel.

"Yes, sir," said the agent, as he led Norman down the hall, passing

through several security access points to get to the infirmary.

The team had arrived at Ravencroft in the afternoon after traveling all night. They were exhausted and hadn't slept much. Especially Reed, who was reliving the incident in his head, over and over, trying to determine what error had been made to cause the accident. The agent went to the desk and informed the nurse that Mr. Osborn was here to see the patients that were admitted this afternoon from Oscorp. The nurse informed him that the team had been given a sedative upon arrival to help them sleep. However, Dr. Richards refused any medication that was offered. The nurse looked at the clipboard and took Agent Dugan and Norman to the room where Reed lay in bed.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Richards. You have a visitor," said the nurse.

Reed was staring blankly out the window. He turned his head to see Norman Osborn standing there.

"I'll wait outside," said Agent Dugan, as he closed the door behind him.

"Reed, I came as soon as I heard what happened. I'm terribly sorry; I know you and Victor are close," said Norman, sympathetically.

"Mr. Osborn, when did you get here?" asked Reed, confused.

He hadn't slept in thirty-two hours, and things were starting to feel surreal.

"I arrived not too long ago. How are you feeling?" asked Norman.

"I failed the team," said Reed, as he looked away, frustrated with himself for letting Victor persuade him to use the electromagnets against his better judgment.

"It wasn't anyone's fault, Reed. You acted professionally and got the team to safety. You did everything that was expected of you. I'm extremely impressed with how you handled the incident, and I'm sure the team is grateful as well," said Norman, trying to ease the pain that could clearly be seen in Reed's eyes.

"I told Victor we shouldn't use electromagnets to secure the remotely operated vehicle to the submersible vessel. We debated it for weeks, but I let him do it because our friendship was strained from him not getting recognition with the rest of the team when we broke the depth record and won the Award for Ocean Exploration during our first expedition into the Mariana Trench. I failed the team as the Chief Naval Architectural Engineer. I should have trusted my instincts, and maybe this wouldn't have happened," said Reed, as tears welled up in his eyes.

"We don't know for certain if that's the reason for the accident.

They're going to do a full inspection on the vessel to determine the cause once it arrives here at Ravencroft," said Norman.

"I'm tired, Mr. Osborn. I'd like to rest," said Reed.

"Of course, Reed. Get some sleep. We'll get to the bottom of what happened," said Norman, as he turned and walked out of the room.

He was unsure why Reed was taking accountability without having a definitive understanding of what happened.

If he's right about the electromagnets, that could jeopardize his entire career. I'm sure he's just exhausted from everything that took place. I can only imagine the amount of stress they endured being in those circumstances, thought Norman.

He opened the hospital room door and found Agent Dugan waiting there patiently.

"I'll be leaving now, Agent Dugan," said Norman, as the agent nodded and escorted him to the helicopter pad to see him off.

The laboratory at Ravencroft felt quieter than usual. It wasn't that Odo talked much, but rather that Dr. Stillwell had no one to talk to, now that Odo was working at Oscorp four days out of the week. He swirled the contents in the vial around and held it upside down in front of him. He carefully inserted the needle, and pulled the plunger back, allowing the syringe to draw out the serum to an adequate measurement. He set the empty vial on the table and flicked the needle a few times, attempting to remove any air bubbles from the syringe prior to injection. He opened the small cage door and reached in, taking the rodent out.

"Hello, Mickey. I do hope you are the prototype I so long for," said Dr. Stillwell, as he handled the rodent carefully while injecting the contents of the syringe into it.

"Now we wait. Don't you disappoint me, Mickey. I have high expectations of you and your friend Minnie here," he said, as he set the rodent back in the cage.

Dr. Stillwell was an unusual man that thoroughly enjoyed experimenting on living specimens. He watched the rodent as it scurried around the cage, which had its leg amputated prior to it receiving the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum. Dr. Stillwell was in the process of testing the effectiveness of the newly developed serum that Colonel Fury requested Norman Osborn to bring during their meeting on Friday. Dr. Curt Connors had recently produced a new batch of the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum utilizing an experimental method to develop the serum than was previously used.

Dr. Stillwell had been commissioned to assimilate the research being conducted at Oscorp and was instructed to keep separate files on the

experiments that were trialed independently at Ravencroft. This was day two of trialing the new batch serum that Dr. Connors had developed. Dr. Stillwell had trialed the serum on a rodent yesterday using a different method of administration. Oscorp's new batch of the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum had proven to be promising, as the subject survived the administration process, which was an extremely rare occurrence.

The assassination of Dr. Abraham Erskine had rendered the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency incapable of replicating the Human Enhancement Project. Howard Stark found a solution by enlisting German scientist Dr. Arnim Zola, offering asylum under the U.S. government. Dr. Zola was able to reengineer the Super Soldier Serum using the formula that was smuggled out of Germany by James Barnes during the Second World War. However, Dr. Zola was never able to replicate the success that Dr. Erskine had with Project: Captain America.

After the war ended, the Department of Defense decommissioned the project, no longer permitting the Agency to conduct clinical trials on voluntary soldiers. They were limited to preclinical testing in laboratories on rodents and were required to demonstrate its effectiveness before the serum could be clinically trialed on humans.

In 1972, Dr. Arnim Zola passed away. Odo succeeded his father as Head Geneticist and Bioengineer at S.H.I.E.L.D. and was authorized to resume development of the Super Soldier Serum. During that time, he worked closely with Dr. Abraham Cornelius and Dr. Carol Hines, who had been recruited following Dr. Vanko's passing. While conducting preclinical trials on rodents, Odo had managed to find success with a batch of the serum that he had developed. The successful trial resulted in the Department of Defense authorizing the use of the serum on a newly commissioned subject for Project: Weapon X.

It had been two decades since the highly classified project was commissioned by the Department of Defense. To this day, the project has remained unparalleled. The Agency had used all that remained of the vibranium discovered in Antarctica on Project: Weapon X. Though the Department of Defense has since made the discovery of vibranium in Africa, the vibranium mined from Africa is significantly heavier and not as strong or durable as the vibranium from Antarctica. The vibranium deposits from Antarctica were reportedly vast but inaccessible.

The mechanical apparatus that Odo wore was a constant reminder of how vastly superior Dr. Anton Vanko's intellect was compared to those that succeeded him. His contribution and ingenuity left a powerful and lasting legacy within the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency. Being Ravencroft's Chief Biochemical Geneticist brought high expectations for Dr. Stillwell. He felt he hadn't lived up to the legacy his predecessors had left behind. Dr. Cornelius and Dr. Hines

were able to utilize Dr. Vanko's research and developed Project: Weapon X, the most advanced classified project the military had ever produced.

And here I've been reduced to trialing rodents, he thought, resentfully.

Colonel Fury had made it clear that until they could produce a living specimen using the serum on rodents for the Department Policy Board, the Department of Defense would not commission clinical trials.

Following the Second World War, Howard Stark authorized Project: Cerebro and commissioned Dr. Vanko to build a device that would interface with the user's cerebral cortex. In this case, the user was Charles Xavier, who was a telepath that worked for a different branch of the government. According to the classified documents that Dr. Stillwell was briefed on by the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency, Charles Xavier could read and even manipulate the minds of others.

In the early 1960s, they came across a wild humanoid species that was extremely aggressive. It appeared to have hands similar to a human but had retractable claws that could shoot out from between its knuckles. It was retrieved as a juvenile from a poacher that was hunting illegally at night. The man saw the creature's yellow glowing eyes moving through the brush. Fearful it was a predator of some kind, he shot the creature in the head from his deer stand. The poacher panicked at first, thinking he had killed a person, but later described it as some sort of wild man.

Believing it to be dead, he threw the creature's carcass in the back of his pickup truck, which had a camper shell, so in the event that he got pulled over, the remains of what he had poached wouldn't be discovered. When the man was driving home, he heard the creature making noise, growling and screaming like a wild animal as it was trying to break free from the camper shell. He got out of his truck, opened the hatch to the camper shell, and shot the creature several times, believing he had killed it this time. When he arrived home, he went inside to gather cleaning supplies so he could clean the blood out of the bed of his pickup truck. To his terror, while he was attempting to remove the carcass, the creature started to come to. He jumped out of the bed of the pickup, grabbed his rifle out of his truck, and fired several more rounds into the creature. He slammed the camper shell shut, locked it, and was so shaken he called the police.

The Agency was notified and dispatched a team to retrieve the humanoid creature. When they arrived, they tranquilized it with a rhino sedative. It was shackled and caged after being removed from the bed of the truck, which was also confiscated as evidence by the Agency. The creature was transported to a military facility, where it remained in captivity for several years, thought to be too dangerous to interact with.

That was until Colonel Fury assumed command of the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency and recommissioned Project: Cerebro, having the late Dr. Vanko's prototype device reengineered by Dr. Cornelius and Dr. Hines. Charles Xavier was brought back in to assume his role and reinstated to trial the device. Xavier was later commissioned to study the creature and was authorized to use the device to manipulate its mind. The classified documents revealed that it was only after using Dr. Vanko's reengineered device that Charles Xavier could communicate with the creature on a basic level without it lashing out violently.

The Department of Defense funded the research at a military facility that masqueraded as a school for the gifted. Charles Xavier took on the role of a professor while he worked with the creature every day. The events involving the former Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., Dr. Bruce Banner, remained unresolved. This led those at the Department of Defense to speculate that if the humanoid creature was controlled by Charles Xavier using the device created for Project: Cerebro, the creature could be utilized to eliminate Banner.

The creature was nocturnal and extremely fierce in nature. It was considerably faster than a man, extremely strong, and had a keen sense of smell. It also had an abnormally high rate of regenerative properties that were observed in its blood, greatly exceeding what was documented in Steve Rogers' blood samples that were taken from Project: Captain America.

Colonel Nicholas Fury was ordered to oversee Project: Weapon X and devise a strategy to eliminate the creature that was once Dr. Bruce Banner, now referred to by the Agency as Project: Hulk.

Colonel Fury cautioned the Department of Defense, warning that it was an extremely risky operation. Banner currently stood at what was estimated to be over seven feet tall and would only grow in size and strength if the humanoid creature failed to kill Banner swiftly.

The humanoid creature was small in stature, as it was believed to be stunted from being in captivity since it was a juvenile. At night, the creature was unmistakable. It had small eyes, which glowed yellow, giving it exceptional vision in the dark. In the daytime, the creature's eyes were black, and at first glance, the creature could be mistaken for a human from a distance. However, upon closer inspection, it had hair similar to that of a boar on its head that ran down its neck and back, protecting its vulnerable areas. It had thick coarse hair on its arms, legs, and on the sides of its face, which ran down under its chin and throat, all the way down its chest and abdomen.

When the Agency informed Charles Xavier of the project request from the Department of Defense, he strongly urged against it, believing the creature could not be utilized for such a purpose. He explained that he couldn't read the creature like he would a human being. It didn't understand

language; he could only communicate with it on a basic level. He could feel the creature's emotions and suspected it detested humans. However, his words of caution fell on deaf ears, and the humanoid creature was transported to a facility in Banff, Alberta, Canada, where they continued to develop the equipment needed for the project.

Before the creature was transferred to Banff, Alberta, Canada, and commissioned to receive the Super Soldier Serum, the Agency had been intently focused on Project: Hulk. They had spent several months tracking the massive footprints that were left approximately a quarter mile apart from it jumping as it moved, making it extremely difficult to track. They managed to track Banner to Glacier National Park in Montana, where he was found in a catatonic-like stasis and was carefully monitored from a safe distance.

The Agency set up a twenty-four-hour wide-range surveillance team around the perimeter of the site. The area was heavily guarded, careful not to let anyone trespass and wake the creature prematurely. Project: Weapon X was strategically transported to the facility in Banff, Alberta, Canada. It was the closest facility to the drop site that they could operate out of. Banner was located roughly three-hundred miles away, which was about a four-hour drive to Glacier National Park.

Colonel Fury wasn't confident the creature could eliminate Banner and petitioned his chain of command regarding the orders passed down from the Department of Defense. He believed that even if the creature was controlled by Charles Xavier, it wouldn't be enough. However, Dr. Abraham Cornelius and Dr. Carol Hines proposed a unique but risky alteration to the project that Colonel Fury had to have approved. This involved giving the creature the Super Soldier Serum and using the remaining vibranium left over from the original findings in Antarctica, which was much stronger than the vibranium mined out of Africa.

The Department of Defense considered Banner a threat to National Security given that he could not be apprehended or eliminated with conventional weapons. Project: Weapon X was approved, giving the Agency authorization to use the remaining vibranium. Dr. Cornelius and Dr. Hines proposed that they use the Super Soldier Serum on the humanoid creature first, as it already possessed extraordinary regenerative capabilities. They speculated that once the serum had taken effect, it would enhance the creature's regenerative abilities even further, allowing them to conduct the extremely risky operation by applying a casting to the creature's skeletal structure using the rare vibranium that was discovered in Antarctica during the Second World War.

The humanoid creature arrived in Banff, Alberta, Canada, where it underwent the first procedure. It was a huge success; the creature survived the administration process, as hypothesized by Dr. Cornelius and his partner,

Dr. Hines. They documented the results and conducted their research over the course of three months, taking several blood samples for analysis from the creature. When they compared the blood sample analysis taken from Project: Captain America, they were worlds apart. The creature's regenerative capabilities were extraordinary, appearing similar to what they observed in Banner's blood samples that were taken in 1962, providing the Department of Defense with the assurance to carry out the next phase of the project.

This phase of the project was extremely volatile. The team had to operate on the creature quickly, while monitoring for it to wake up from the sedative it was given. This proved to be extremely difficult with its newly enhanced regenerative capabilities acquired from the Super Soldier Serum. In the past, the military had to sedate the creature with a rhino tranquilizer in order to safely transfer it from its cage to the transport container. The creature now possessed enhanced regenerative capabilities, which made the project even more dangerous. This would require the creature to be sedated several times over the course of the procedure. They used multiple needle-like drills that penetrated the creature simultaneously, injecting the vibranium onto the creature's skeletal structure. This meant the creature needed to endure the metal being injected on to its skeletal structure in a melted state at a temperature of 1,860 degrees Celsius.

The creature was harnessed into place, as the drill points were strategically arranged to penetrate several entry points simultaneously in the face, top of the skull, back of the skull, arms, hands, back, spinal column, chest, ribs, hips, legs, and feet. It was a risk, as the procedure was assumed impossible without the creature going into shock and dying. Another cause for concern amongst the medical staff present was that the burn injuries from the liquified metal would cause nerve damage that would not be able to heal before the metal solidified. They feared that if the metal covered the damaged nerves, they would never be able to properly regrow.

Regardless of the medical staff's apprehension, they were ordered to proceed with the next phase of the project. Despite the creature being heavily sedated throughout the procedure, it woke several times, each time growing more and more frantic. The creature's suffering was evident, as its body twisted and contorted uncontrollably, even while being under the strongest sedatives they had available. Each time they tranquilized the creature, its recovery accelerated, which was unforeseen by the team.

The classified document went on to describe the details of the event, revealing the creature's vital signs stabilized. The procedure was successfully completed, and the creature was sedated again before the team removed its harness and transferred it from the table to the portable cage.

The briefing ended there. It didn't reveal that while transporting the

creature to the portable cage, the unthinkable happened: the creature awoke in a state of confusion, becoming completely enraged, killing Dr. Abraham Cornelius, Dr. Carol Hines, and the rest of the team assisting with the project. Dr. Stillwell was disappointed to find that the briefing concluded with the experimentation of the creature and didn't reveal the events that followed Project: Weapon X.

He sat there staring off, wondering what happened to the team and if the humanoid creature that was used for Project: Weapon X was successfully able to track and eliminate Dr. Bruce Banner, referred to by the Agency as Project: Hulk.

The analysis from the classified document concluded that the creature used for Project: Weapon X was only able to survive the procedure due to its rapid rate of regeneration. It was determined that it would not have been possible for a Super Soldier to have survived the procedure.

Sitting there, his eyes came back into focus as he stared at the cage on the table in front of him. Suddenly, he sprang to his feet in disbelief. The rodent that had been administered the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum yesterday had regrown its limb. The new batch of the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum that Norman Osborn brought the Colonel for their meeting on Friday had worked and was extremely aggressive. This was the moment he had been waiting for; a successful preclinical trial meant that the project now qualified for clinical testing.

Odo awoke to his newly acquired living situation in the accommodating handicap suite at Oscorp Industries. He grew up a prisoner of war, only knowing a military base as his home. Now he had lived in two separate places in one calendar year.

It must be fate. I'm destined to achieve my goal and stop this relentless regime of power-hungry men, he thought, as he struggled to pull himself into his wheelchair.

Such theatrics were merely in case there were cameras in the suite. Odo had learned many years ago to take precautions and exaggerate his disability to appear weak. He couldn't afford to let his guard down, not when he was so close to achieving his goal. He plotted everything down to the very last detail, in hopes of one day collapsing the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency that he secretly loathed. He made his way to the suite's restroom, where he prepared for another day at Oscorp with Dr. Curt Connors and Dr. Richard Parker. Odo found both men to be pleasant to work with; Dr. Connors was somewhat self-absorbed in his research, having little time for small talk, while Dr. Parker was more personable.

Dr. Parker was quite talkative and extremely curious about how Odo's mechanical apparatus worked. The two men bore stark contrasts to one another, yet complemented each other in the laboratory when it came to their research. They worked extremely well together, making it obvious how they had achieved such extraordinary success as a team. That was the reason Norman Osborn acquired their research with the purchase of Trask Industries many years ago. Richard Parker was clearly the genius behind the NeoGenics Project. Still, Odo found it strange that Mr. Osborn didn't include Dr. Connors in their most recent meeting with the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency at Ravencroft. He exited his suite and made his way to Oscorp's genetics laboratory.

Odo spent the first half of the morning working with Dr. Parker. Richard's curiosity eventually got the better of him and he inquired about the mysterious device Odo wore. Dr. Zola revealed that the mechanical apparatus was interfaced neurologically with his cerebral cortex and connected to his central nervous system, which created a direct link between his brain and the device. In exchange, Dr. Parker elaborated on how he genetically edited the DNA of the spiders and sequenced it with the human genome.

"The fact that the spiders are able to breed is remarkable. I was surprised to learn that they are able to breed; hybrid species usually cannot," said Odo, as he observed the spiders in the terrarium.

"You're absolutely right, Dr. Zola. Usually when animals of two

different species mate, their hybrid offspring can be unhealthy or sterile. Sexual differences in fertility follow a pattern known as 'Haldane's Rule', which states that hybrids are afflicted more when they inherit two different sex chromosomes. We came to realize that the reason they're capable of breeding is because when the spiders' genomes were spliced and edited, and their DNA was sequenced, it resulted in an entirely new species," said Richard.

"That is truly extraordinary. The Nobel Prize was well deserved. I've witnessed phenomenal scientific achievements in my years. This anomaly definitely ranks amongst them," said Odo.

"Thank you, Dr. Zola, I'm flattered. Unfortunately, they haven't bred since September of last year. We're hoping they'll breed again in the fall. They don't produce as many eggs in a controlled environment. They produced approximately three-thousand eggs last time but have less than a three percent fertility rate. Our peak arachnid count was eighty-one, but many died off throughout the year. We've managed to maintain a small population. We currently have twenty-three spiders," said Richard, as he peered into the terrarium.

"I do hope they continue to flourish; they truly are something special, Dr. Parker. I hope I can be of some assistance mapping the species' genome to help understand the genetic sequencing required to replicate this miracle of creation," said Odo.

Odo hadn't felt this way since being in the presence of Dr. Vanko. It had been some time since he saw something genuine in someone he worked alongside.

Richard Parker could be the key to bringing down the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency. If I could find a way to inform him of the projects that have taken place in the past, he could blow the whistle on them, he thought, contemplating how he could make it known to Richard without blowing his own cover.

They made their way through the laboratory as the workday was nearing its end. Odo shadowed Dr. Parker and Dr. Connors, discussing their research in depth. Unbeknownst to the team at Oscorp, Odo had significant insight into the NeoGenics project as a result of Ravencroft compiling information on their research. Richard checked the time, knowing Peter would be on his way to the laboratory after school. He didn't want to make Dr. Zola uncomfortable on his first week at Oscorp, so as a precaution, he had Peter assist Mary in her office this week instead of working with him, like usual.

Peter meant well, but Richard wanted to make sure they made a good first impression. As much as Richard was fascinated with the

mechanical apparatus that Dr. Zola wore, he felt sorry for the man. He knew his life must have been difficult, and yet, he was a brilliant geneticist who beat the odds that were against him from the day he was born. Peter came into the laboratory and set his backpack down on the chair beside his mother. She asked him how his day was and told him that he would be working with her again while his father worked with Dr. Connors and Dr. Zola. He stood there looking over at Dr. Zola, fascinated by the apparatus he wore, wondering why he wasn't allowed to interact with him. It only made the man seem more mysterious, making Peter want to meet him all the more.

They began to pack their things up for the day and headed for the exit of the laboratory together. Richard felt somewhat guilty for not letting Peter talk to Dr. Zola, thinking it was best until he was better acquainted with the staff at Oscorp. However, he stopped just before they walked through the exit.

"Dr. Zola, I don't believe you've met my son, Peter," he said, putting his hand on Peter's shoulder.

He brought his wheelchair to a stop and turned it to face the boy.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Peter. My name is Odo," he said, softly.

"It's a pleasure to meet you too, Odo. I mean, Dr. Zola."

Peter looked up at his father, unsure if he would be scolded later for being so informal.

Odo had never spoken to a child before and felt somewhat emotional from the brief encounter.

"Good night, Dr. Zola. We'll see you tomorrow morning. Enjoy your evening," said Mary, warmly.

"Thank you. Good evening," said Odo, as he turned his wheelchair and made his way to the elevator.

Odo was unsure what he was feeling. He had never had a moment talking with a family that he could remember, not even his own. The only memories he had of his father was living on base. His father feared for his mother's safety after becoming involved with the Hydra Regime and sent her to stay with her family in Quedlinburg, a small town in Germany, where she raised Odo. When the war ended, Arnim Zola was offered asylum by the Americans. He wrote to his wife, assuring her that he could provide medical care for the child, which she could not in Germany.

Odo used the mechanical apparatus to swipe the key card, opening the door to his suite at Oscorp. He was restless and wanted to get out of his wheelchair but remained in character, appearing helpless and bound to it. He made his way to the window where he spent most of his leisure time, staring out at what freedom looked like, captivated by the city that never sleeps.

The Parkers are good people. It would be selfish to get them involved, thought Odo, as he plotted his next move.

The phone rang unexpectedly, startling him. He directed his wheelchair to the phone sitting on the table.

"Yes?" he said, uncertain who would be calling him at Oscorp.

"Dr. Zola, it's Colonel Fury. Apologies for disturbing you after hours. I was just informed that Dr. Stillwell had a successful preclinical trial today using the new batch sample of the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum that I had Norman Osborn bring to last Friday's meeting. I'd like you to review Dr. Stillwell's written analysis of the experiment tomorrow while you're at Oscorp and write an assessment based on the data he's provided. I need it completed by the end of the day tomorrow. We'll go over it on Friday when you're on-site before I submit it to the Department Policy Board. As we discussed, you can log into Ravencroft's network from Oscorp and evaluate the details he's provided. I had him put it in a classified document detailing the trial plans and our immediate steps going forward with the project," said Colonel Fury.

"Yes, sir. I'll review it first thing tomorrow morning and submit my assessment promptly," said Odo.

"Excellent, I'll see you Friday," said the Colonel, as he hung up the phone.

Odo sat there a moment, processing what the Colonel had just told him.

Dr. Stillwell had a successful preclinical trial using the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum from Oscorp that Norman Osborn brought to last Friday's meeting, which means my suspicions were correct: they're experimenting at Ravencroft. However, this is happening much sooner than I anticipated, he thought, as his mind raced.

The Colonel intended to submit the laboratory results and project analysis of the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum that was successfully trialed to the Department Policy Board. That was the requisite for the Agency to have the project commissioned by the Department of Defense to begin clinical testing.

Odo realized that the classified document he needed for proof to reveal what the military intended to use Oscorp's NeoGenics research for was now available to him. He sat and plotted his next move, carefully calculating how he could leak it to Dr. Parker. He was certain that Richard Parker would not stand by while his research was being used for unethical purposes. He just had to give him the ammunition he needed to bring them down.

I will not allow the military to weaponize this serum as they did in the

past. My father joined Hydra and developed the Human Enhancement Project, believing he could help the less fortunate born with birth defects, like myself. He wanted to eliminate pain and suffering from the world, not ensure it. The military only seeks this research to weaponize it, to create an army of Super Soldiers and bring destruction upon the world. I will not allow that to happen; I will put an end to it at all costs, he thought, as he sat there plotting his next move.

Richard felt guilty on the drive home for not allowing Peter to ask Dr. Zola any questions about the mechanical apparatus. He could see being left out at the laboratory had upset Peter, and he wanted to make up for it. He looked in the rearview mirror at Peter, thinking of what to say.

"I talked to Dr. Zola about the mechanical apparatus he wears," said Richard, waiting to see Peter's reaction.

He perked up in his chair, trying not to seem too excited.

"Really? What did he tell you about it?" he asked, still not thrilled that he didn't get to ask the questions himself.

"He told me the mechanical device is interfaced neurologically with his cerebral cortex and is connected to his central nervous system," said Richard.

"Did he say how they made the device?" asked Mary.

"No, I didn't want to make too much of it; I've asked him about it several times already. It was nice of him to tell me as much as he did, especially knowing he doesn't openly talk about it. He really does have a mysterious way about him. I was tempted to question him more about it, but I didn't want to pry too hard. I'm sure with time he'll open up about it on his own," said Richard.

"Does that mean I have to stay with Mom every day at the lab now that he works with you, Dad?" asked Peter, feeling somewhat dejected.

Mary shot Peter a disapproving look. "It's been that awful, huh?" she said, sarcastically, while shaking her head.

"Not if you promise me you won't ask any him personal questions about the apparatus he wears, Peter. If he were to make a formal complaint to Mr. Osborn, I wouldn't be able to have you come up to the laboratory after school anymore," said Richard, knowing that should be enough to ensure Peter wouldn't attempt to question Dr. Zola.

They pulled into the driveway. Peter grabbed his backpack and opened the door to the vehicle. He didn't understand what the big deal was. He just wanted to know how the mechanical apparatus worked. He didn't see why his father was making such a fuss about him talking to Dr. Zola. He went inside, took his jacket and shoes off, set his backpack on the floor by the

staircase, and headed upstairs to his room.

Richard and Mary came inside and hung up their jackets and set their things down. Mary went to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine before starting dinner. Richard went to the living room and grabbed the television remote off the table that was beside the phone and noticed that there were four missed calls and a voice message. He pressed the button on the answering machine to listen to the voice message that was recorded.

"Hi Richard. It's Alicia Masters, Ben Grimm's fiancée. I reached out to Oscorp and was informed that there had been an accident during the expedition on Monday. I was told not to worry and that everything was fine. They said that they were just holding the team as a precautionary measure to conduct some physical examinations and to get a statement of what happened. Have you heard from Reed or anyone at Oscorp as to when they'll be released? I'm starting to get concerned. I spoke with Mr. Osborn yesterday, and he assured me everything was fine, but I still haven't heard from Ben or had any update. Can you call me back if you know what hospital the team is being held at, please? I'd like to know what's going on. I just want to talk to Ben and make sure he's alright. Thanks, bye," said Alicia, as the message ended.

Richard stood there shocked. He hadn't heard anything from Mr. Osborn or anyone at Oscorp about an accident during the expedition. He turned to see Mary standing there, seemingly just as dumbfounded as he was hearing the news.

"Why weren't we informed by Oscorp? That's some pretty serious news to keep quiet about," said Mary, feeling sorry for Alicia, who was blind and alone without Ben there.

"I'm not sure what the hell is going on. There has to be some explanation for why they wouldn't say anything," said Richard, as he began to pace the living room.

"I think it's strange that Norman Osborn would speak with Alicia himself. It doesn't seem like something he would handle personally unless it was serious," said Mary, suspiciously.

"Alicia said they were holding the team as a precautionary measure to conduct some physical examinations and to get a statement of what happened. Why do I have the feeling they're being held at Ravencroft?" said Richard, thinking that nothing had felt right since he had been to the military facility with Mr. Osborn.

"Maybe it's worse than he let on. He may have spoken with her personally so she wouldn't panic and start asking questions to the wrong people when she didn't hear from Ben," said Mary, trying to make sense of the situation.

"We'll get some answers tomorrow; let's not discuss it right now. I don't want Peter to hear us," said Richard, knowing Peter would only ask questions he didn't have the answers to.

The following morning, Odo got to Oscorp's laboratory early to review the classified document that was sent to him regarding Dr. Stillwell's analysis on the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum that was trialed at Ravencroft. He sat in his wheelchair in front of his computer, while he analyzed the data from the blood samples that were taken.

The document detailed the Agency's next step to send the analysis to the Department Policy Board and have them request that the Department of Defense commission the next phase of the project. The classified document outlined their intentions of clinically trialing the serum on inmates at Ravencroft.

This is perfect, he thought, as he read through the classified document.

Odo set the PDF file to a "Read Only" document, so that it could be viewed but not edited. He then set an expiration time on the document so that once it was opened, it would automatically delete after five minutes. He set the PDF file to be shared with Dr. Parker tomorrow morning, as every Friday Odo was scheduled to work on-site at Ravencroft. Thus removing himself from any suspicion should Richard Parker try to alert anyone at Oscorp after reading the classified document.

That should be enough time to read the document and give him adequate insight into what the Agency intends on using his research for, thought Odo, while he sat there typing up his assessment of the analysis for the Colonel.

His hands were sweating, and he felt on edge, but at this stage, he realized that his window to stop the Agency from conducting these experiments was getting smaller with each year that passed. He had already exceeded the life expectancy of those that suffer with his condition, according to several medical professionals. He believed the only thing that had kept him going for so long was seeing his plan through to the end.

I must complete my mission, for my father, Dr. Vanko, and all those who have suffered in the name of these projects, he thought.

He set the classified document up to be shared with Dr. Parker when he turned his computer on in the morning. Odo was able to observe Dr. Parker's routine in the morning when he got to the laboratory for nearly a week. He would arrive with his wife, go into his office, and log onto his computer to check his emails before starting his day in the laboratory.

His wife worked out of the administration office located in a separate

part the laboratory. Dr. Parker didn't appear to have a camera in his office as far as Odo could tell when he was given the tour of the laboratory on his first day at Oscorp. There were cameras in the communal laboratory and main access points, but nothing compared to what he was used to at the military base or Ravencroft.

He was also privy to how the database functioned and how it interfaced between Oscorp and Ravencroft. The Agency would only receive files that were saved in Oscorp's database. He locked the file with a password, using a "Read Only" PDF file type that could not be saved to the database. Therefore, it could not be tracked by the Agency.

His plan came together seamlessly, as he always believed it would. He had everything set as Dr. Parker and his wife arrived at the laboratory. Mary's office was near the main access point. She went in and set her things down as Richard made his way through the lab to his office. Odo silently made his way out into the communal area when he heard them enter the laboratory.

"Good morning, Dr. Zola. How would you assess your first week working with us at Oscorp?" asked Richard, as he turned the light on in his office and stood in the doorway.

"Good morning, Dr. Parker. It's been a pleasant experience. I thoroughly enjoy working with you, your lovely wife, and the team here at Oscorp," said Odo, moving silently in his wheelchair toward Richard.

"I'm told you'll work from Ravencroft tomorrow and return on Monday," said Richard.

"Yes, that's right. I'll be working at Oscorp four days a week, Monday through Thursday," said Odo.

"That's a lot of back and forth. They certainly keep you busy," said Richard, as he went and set his things down at his desk and turned on his computer.

"I don't mind. I prefer getting out and working on new things," said Odo, honestly.

"Please excuse me, Dr. Zola. I need to step out for a moment; I'll be back shortly," said Richard.

"Certainly, Dr. Parker," said Odo, curious to know why Richard had ended their conversation so abruptly.

The sudden change in pattern this morning made him nervous about sending Richard the classified document tomorrow.

A week wasn't much time to observe Dr. Parker's routine, thought Odo.

Despite his uncertainty, he realized it was unlikely he'd ever have an opportunity like this again.

I mustn't waver now; I'm too close, he thought, as he made his way over to Mary Parker's office to see what he could find out.

He knocked on the open office door as she turned to see the small, twisted man in the doorway.

"Good morning, Mrs. Parker. I hope I'm not disturbing you," said Odo, courteously.

"Good morning, Dr. Zola. No, not at all. Please, come in," said Mary, somewhat caught off guard.

Odo had not made much of an effort to speak with Mary, as most of her time was spent in her office on administrative duties.

"We haven't had much time to speak with one another; I figured I'd take advantage of the opportunity. Dr. Parker informed me that he had to step out for a moment this morning. It seemed rather urgent. Is everything okay?" asked Odo, trying his best to appear unassuming.

Mary hesitated a moment. Being questioned out of the blue by the small, crippled man threw her off, and she uncharacteristically let her guard down.

"Richard is concerned for the members of the oceanography team. We were informed that there was some sort of accident during the team's expedition on Monday. Richard wanted to speak with Mr. Osborn to make sure everyone is okay," said Mary, immediately feeling as though she revealed too much to the small, disabled man.

"I'm extremely sorry to hear that. I had the privilege of working with some of the team members from Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography. They are exceptionally brilliant," said Odo, modestly.

"I heard from Richard that the team made upgrades to the submersible vessel, and that your name was brought up during the launch ceremony on Monday," said Mary.

"I helped design the power source and aided in the smelting and tempering of the metal ore that was used for the vessel. Dr. Richards and Dr. Vondume are very passionate and dedicated to their craft. It was inspiring to be around. I sincerely hope everyone is okay," said Odo.

"Thank you, Dr. Zola," said Mary.

He smiled and nodded as he turned his wheelchair, silently making his way back to the small office they assigned him. He was curious to know what could have happened to cause the accident. Odo had not taken part in the architectural design of the craft, but he provided them with the Arc

technology used to power the submersible vessel. The military provided the vibranium ore mined from Africa, which Odo had smelted and tempered into the rare metal that was used for the deep-sea vessel.

Richard walked up to the secretary's desk outside of Mr. Osborn's office.

"Good morning. I don't have an appointment to see Mr. Osborn, but would you be so kind as to inform him that Richard Parker is here to see him? Tell him I heard that there was an accident involving the team from the Institution of Oceanography during the expedition on Monday," said Richard, plainly.

Richard knew rightly that Mr. Osborn's secretary wouldn't let him waltz in without having an appointment scheduled. Richard could be very direct, and commanded a level of respect, even from Norman Osborn.

"Certainly, Dr. Parker. I'll let him know you're here. Please take a seat in the foyer," said the secretary.

"Thank you."

He didn't have to wait long. Norman came out as soon as his secretary told him that Dr. Parker said something about an accident involving the oceanography team during the expedition on Monday.

"Good morning, Richard. How'd you hear about the accident?" asked Norman, curiously.

"I received a message on my answering machine last night from Alicia Masters, Benn Grimm's fiancée. She said she was concerned that she hadn't heard from Ben and called Oscorp on Tuesday. She went on in the message to say that you informed her that there had been an accident but assured her the team was alright. She explained that you told her the team was being held as a precautionary measure to conduct some physical examinations and to get a statement of what happened, but that she still hadn't heard from Ben. What happened during the expedition?" asked Richard, directly.

"Let's go into my office so we can talk in private," said Norman, as he turned and led Richard down the corridor to his office.

Norman walked up to the retinal scanner and looked into it, tapping his access card to the panel as the door to his office sounded. He held the door open as Richard entered his office and closed it behind him.

"Please, take a seat," said Norman, as he sat down at his desk.

Richard sat down across from Norman, anxious to hear what had happened to the team during the expedition, and why it hadn't been disclosed.

"The team is being held at Ravencroft due to an accident that

occurred during the expedition while they were at a depth of ten-thousand-nine-hundred meters. They're still trying to determine the exact cause of the incident. Dr. Vondume suffered severe burns to his face from what was determined to be an electrical arc flash. They believe it could have been a faulty circuit in the control panel. The rest of the team didn't sustain any injuries and were able to stabilize Dr. Vondume during the ascent to the surface," said Norman.

"Victor… my God. Alicia said you told her the team was okay. Why hasn't the team been discharged? What's the reason for the discretion?" asked Richard, shaken to hear what had happened to Dr. Vondume.

"We signed a non-disclosure agreement when we partnered with the military, Richard," said Norman, trying to select his words carefully.

"What does that have to do with letting Alicia speak with Ben?" asked Richard, trying to control his emotions and remain professional.

"The team was supposed to be discharged after they filled out an incident report detailing what happened. However, I was told they began experiencing some adverse effects after surfacing, which are still undiagnosed. As a precautionary measure, they're being held at Ravencroft until they're medically cleared," said Norman, worried he had already said too much.

"What kind of adverse effects?" asked Richard, confused.

"It's still unclear. I was told that the team reported feeling ill after waking up Tuesday while they were filling out the incident report," said Norman.

"Then why did you tell Alicia the team didn't sustain any injuries if they've been experiencing adverse effects?" asked Richard, feeling himself becoming frustrated.

"When they arrived at Ravencroft they were medically examined and cleared to return to duty," said Norman, trying to control the conversation from becoming emotional.

"Ben's fiancée sounded worried sick in the message she left on my answering machine. She called my home several times. She said in the message that you assured her that the team was fine on Tuesday," said Richard, trying to get more out of Norman.

"I wasn't at liberty to speak to her about the incident, Richard. That's simply what I was told by the docking crew when I was first informed of the accident. Aside from Dr. Vondume, the rest of the team appeared to be uninjured. I handled the call personally because I wanted to assure any family members that were expecting to hear from the team that their loved ones were being taken care of and were alright. I flew out to Ravencroft to make

sure the team was okay on Tuesday afternoon. I was assured everyone was fine, just exhausted," said Norman, trying to give Richard the impression that he was just as concerned for the well being of the team as he was.

Richard took his glasses off and pinched the bridge of his nose; he was feeling a stress headache coming on.

"What's the status of the team now?" asked Richard.

"I'm still waiting to hear back from Colonel Fury," said Norman.

"I'd like to speak with Reed and make sure the team's alright," said Richard, uncertain if his demands would be met.

"I can put in a request, but it would have to be something simple, like a phone call," said Norman.

Norman was worried that if he didn't appear sympathetic and accommodating, Richard could become disgruntled and problematic.

"That'll suffice," replied Richard.

"Very well. I'll reach out to the Colonel at some point today and see if I can get you a phone call with Dr. Richards," said Norman.

"I appreciate that, Mr. Osborn."

He stood up and shook Norman's hand before turning to leave the office. Norman saw Richard out, then went and poured himself a glass of whiskey. He sat down at his desk, wondering if he'd said too much.

It couldn't be helped. That damned woman reached out to Parker and got him involved, he thought, as he shot back the whiskey and picked up the phone.

"Get me Colonel Fury on the line," said Norman to his secretary.

He sat there a moment, wondering how this was going to play out. He had received word Tuesday evening that the team was experiencing unusual symptoms during their incident report. He wasn't given much detail other than that they didn't feel well enough to finish the report and would be held at Ravencroft until further notice. Now, with it being three days since the expedition, it was to be expected that loved ones would be concerned. There would need to be some explanation given.

I'll leave that for the Colonel to decide, he thought, as he got up and poured himself another whiskey.

Norman felt tense; he didn't enjoy these interactions with the Colonel. He felt that the matter should have been disclosed, as these things happen, especially at sea.

All this discretion makes it appear like we're at fault, or that we're hiding something, he thought.

The phone rang as he picked up the receiver. “Colonel Fury is on line one, Mr. Osborn,” said the secretary.

He took a deep breath and pressed the button on the phone to connect the call.

“Good morning, Colonel Fury. I hope I’m not disturbing you,” said Norman, trying to come off as casually as possible.

“Not at all, Mr. Osborn. What can I do for you?” asked the Colonel.

“I had Dr. Richard Parker pay me a visit this morning. He was asking about what happened during the expedition. It seems Ben Grimm’s fiancée, Alicia Masters, reached out to him and left him a voice message disclosing that there was an incident during the expedition. She called Oscorp Tuesday morning inquiring why she hadn’t heard from Ben. I informed Miss Masters personally that there was an incident but that everyone was safe. She’s totally blind and relies heavily on Ben; I didn’t want her to panic. Nevertheless, she informed Dr. Parker of the situation and that she was assured the team was alright Tuesday, but that Ben still hasn’t been in touch with her. I’m concerned that Richard Parker may become problematic if he’s not handled with consideration,” said Norman.

“She reached out to Dr. Parker? What’s their relationship?” asked the Colonel.

“Richard Parker and Reed Richards are close friends. Ben introduced his fiancée to everyone about five years ago at our company Christmas party, if my memory serves me. They’ve most likely become acquainted with one another over the years at the annual events we host here at Oscorp,” said Norman.

“I didn’t want this getting out just yet. What else did he say?” asked the Colonel.

“He questioned why the team hadn’t been discharged. He also requested to talk to Dr. Richards,” said Norman.

“Unfortunately, the condition of the team has yet to improve. It seems we have no choice but to release a statement of the incident. We’ll praise the team as heroes for saving their comrade, Dr. Vondume, who suffered a terrible injury during the expedition. I’ll arrange for Dr. Richards to call Dr. Parker’s office later today, once the statement’s been released. I was informed Ben Grimm’s condition has progressively gotten worse over the last couple of days and that he recently lost consciousness. If he’s not physically capable of calling his fiancée today, I’ll have the medical staff contact her by the end of the week and authorize a visit on-site here,” said Colonel Fury, reluctantly.

“Does the medical staff at your facility have any idea what’s wrong

with the team?" asked Norman, concerned that there was information being withheld.

"I've commissioned the doctors to run every diagnostic test they can to figure out what's going on with the team," said the Colonel.

"I appreciate that, Colonel Fury."

"We're all concerned, Mr. Osborn. Send my Chief Administrative Officer Richard Parker's contact information. Tell him he can expect a call later today," said the Colonel.

"Thank you, Colonel. I'll send his contact information right away and let Dr. Parker know to expect a call," said Norman, as he hung up the phone.

Norman got up and poured himself another whiskey, contemplating what could be wrong with the team and what he would do in the event that they couldn't return to duty. He had tried to put the unfortunate incident out of his mind after speaking with Alicia Masters and visiting the team at Ravencroft on Tuesday. He had hoped they could focus on the newly discovered species, rather than the accident involving Dr. Vondume.

I didn't expect to face all these challenges after signing the contract with the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency, but I should have—especially after the briefing I had with Agent Dugan, he thought warily.

He picked up the phone and dialed Richard Parker's extension. Richard was at his desk going through his emails as the phone rang. He looked over, seeing that it was Norman Osborn.

That was fast, he thought, as he picked up the phone.

"Richard Parker speaking," he said, anxious to hear what Mr. Osborn had to say.

"Richard, I spoke with Colonel Fury. He's going to have Reed contact you later today. They'll have Ben Grimm contact his fiancée if he's well enough to do so. If he's not, the medical staff will get in touch with Miss Masters and schedule her to visit with him. I'll arrange for a personal attendant to escort her to Ravencroft; I don't want you to trouble yourself over it. I know you're looking out for the team, but I've been assured that it's being taken care of. There will be a formal announcement regarding the accident now that the incident has been assessed," said Norman.

"I understand. Thank you for reaching out to Colonel Fury, Mr. Osborn. I appreciate it," said Richard.

"Not to worry, Richard. We're all concerned," said Norman, as he hung up the phone.

Richard got up and walked out into the laboratory. Odo was in his office at his desk, reviewing the diagnostic test on the DNA sample taken

from the rodent that was given the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum. Richard walked by unnoticed on his way to talk to his wife, who was in the administration office. He stood in the doorway for a moment, watching her while she sat in front of the computer. He knocked lightly on the door as she turned to see him standing there.

"Hey, any news on the team's condition?" asked Mary.

"I went and spoke with Mr. Osborn regarding the call we got from Alicia," said Richard.

"How'd that go?" asked Mary.

"Surprisingly well. He reached out to Colonel Fury at Ravencroft. They're going to have Reed call me later today," said Richard.

"Did he say why they haven't mentioned anything about the accident until now?" asked Mary.

"He said they were still assessing the incident. They were apparently going to discharge the team Tuesday, but they reported feeling ill while giving their incident report. He confirmed that they're going to put out a statement regarding the accident. I was informed that Victor was seriously injured while they were over ten-thousand meters deep. He received severe burns to his face from an electrical arc flash. They suspect it was due to a faulty circuit in the control panel," said Richard, who was still trying to process the news himself.

"Are you serious? Is he alright? What an absolute nightmare they must have had to endure to get to the surface," said Mary.

"I didn't get much out of Mr. Osborn on Victor's condition, other than the team was able to stabilize him during their ascent to the surface," said Richard, uncertain if things at Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography would ever be the same.

"Did he say if we can visit?" asked Mary.

"No. I'll push for that next. Let's see what Reed has to say today. I should get back to work. We'll talk later," said Richard, as he turned and walked out of the administrative office.

Odo was sitting in the small spare office they provided him, listening to their conversation.

This is ideal timing for my plan. With everything that's going on at the moment, Dr. Parker's emotions are heightened; it's the perfect distraction, thought Odo.

He spent the rest of the day working on completing his assessment of Dr. Stillwell's analysis on the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum for the Colonel. The classified document had been set up as a PDF "Read Only" file that

would automatically be shared with Richard when he turned his computer on in the morning. Once the document was opened and reached its expiration limit of five minutes it would automatically delete, leaving no trace of the file on the computer or of the sender. He made his way over to Richard's office and knocked on the door lightly.

"Excuse me, Dr. Parker. I will be taking my leave for the day. I will return on Monday," said Odo.

"Thank you, Dr. Zola. Forgive my absence in the laboratory today," said Richard.

He had spent the majority of the day in his office after getting back from speaking with Mr. Osborn. He had been lost in thought, unable to take his mind off of Victor and the oceanography team. He wondered how severe Victor's burns were as he waited in his office for Reed's call.

"No need to apologize, Dr. Parker. It's only natural to be concerned for your coworkers. Good evening," said Odo, as he turned his wheelchair and made his way towards the exit.

"Good evening," said Richard, staring blankly at the empty doorway for a moment, wondering how Dr. Zola knew he was concerned for his coworkers.

A few hours had passed. Peter and Mary were sitting in the administration office, talking as she finished up her work. Richard began to gather his things. He was almost ready to give up on the call he had been expecting when suddenly the phone rang. He shut the door to his office and picked it up.

"Richard Parker speaking."

"I was told an extremely intense individual demanded to speak to me today," said Reed, sarcastically.

"It's good to hear from you, my friend: you had me worried. I'm so sorry to hear about Victor. How are you and the rest of the team feeling?" asked Richard, knowing the incident must have taken its toll on Reed.

"I'm doing okay; I'm more concerned about Susan and the rest of the team. Aside from Victor, Ben seems to be in the worst condition out of the four of us. Though I can't say any of us have felt right since surfacing," said Reed.

"Have you had a chance to see Victor?" asked Richard.

"They radioed the Coast Guard and flew him to a Naval hospital in Guam when we got to the surface," said Reed, still finding it difficult to speak about it.

"Victor's still in Guam? I'm sorry, I had no idea. I can't imagine what

you had to go through during the ascent to the surface. Mr. Osborn said they believe it was an arc flash from a faulty circuit in the control panel," said Richard.

"That's what they say. I don't remember much. Jonathan said he felt a static charge and saw a flash of light before Victor started screaming," said Reed, softly.

"I know you've always held yourself accountable for the safety of the team during your expeditions, and I know how difficult this must be for you, but this was not your fault. You got the team to the surface and did everything you could to ensure you all made it back," said Richard, realizing that it must be painful to talk about it so soon after the accident.

Reed was silent, unable to reply to Richard.

"How are you feeling? How's Susan, and the rest of the team?" asked Richard, trying to change the subject.

"As far as I know, everyone felt fine on the plane ride back, but the next day, we started feeling sick. It felt as though every cell in my body was vibrating uncontrollably. It's difficult to explain. It almost felt like my body was going to melt. Believe me, I know how it sounds. I had a chance to talk to Ben about it briefly before the pain became intolerable for him and he lost consciousness. He said he was feeling something similar, only the opposite. He felt like his body was becoming unbearably stiff and hard. The doctors have since put him into a medically induced coma until they can figure out what's going on. Jonathan felt the vibration as well but said it was like he was on fire. Susan said she felt something but struggled to explain it. She described having a flashing light in her vision and has been complaining of excruciating migraines. Needless to say, we weren't much help explaining our symptoms to the doctors for a diagnosis," said Reed.

"I'm sure the medical staff at Ravencroft will figure out what's going on. I feel for Alicia: she reached out to us when she hadn't heard from Ben. Mr. Osborn assured her the team was fine and would likely be discharged Tuesday evening," said Richard.

"Mr. Osborn came to Ravencroft. We spoke briefly, but I was out of it. I hadn't slept and couldn't wrap my head around what had happened," said Reed, as he began feeling somewhat nauseous.

"We're looking forward to you and the team making a speedy recovery and coming back to Oscorp. In fact, I'm almost certain Peter left his sweater at your office purposely when we went to see you before you left for Guam. That way, we'd have an excuse to go back to the laboratory and hear your stories about the expedition," said Richard, letting Reed know just how much his presence at Oscorp meant to Peter.

“I was wondering whose sweater that was when I was leaving. Tell him he can come visit me as soon as we get back to Oscorp,” said Reed, feeling exhausted suddenly.

“I’m going to go lie down, Richard. My head is still spinning,” said Reed.

“You rest up, my friend. I’m glad you and the team made it back to us safe. Keep me updated; you can call me here at the office or at home anytime. Let me know if you need anything at all. I’m looking forward to seeing you soon. Take care, Reed,” said Richard.

“I’m looking forward to seeing you, too. Thanks for reaching out. I’m lucky to have such a good friend. Bye, Richard,” said Reed, feeling a sudden wave of emotion as he hung up the phone.

Richard Parker

Richard woke to the sound of his alarm clock buzzing quietly as he rolled over and turned it off. Mary kicked the blanket off and rolled out of bed, putting her robe on and tying it.

"Thank goodness it's Friday," she said, as she put her slippers on and made her way downstairs to make breakfast.

Richard got up and put his glasses on as he walked down the hallway, lightly knocking on Peter's door.

"Son, it's time to get up and get ready for school," said Richard, quietly.

"Okay, Dad, I'm up," said Peter, as he stretched out tiredly.

Richard opened the door and flicked the light on to Peter's room so he wouldn't doze back off, then made his way downstairs for breakfast. Peter got up, went into the bathroom, grabbed his towel, and hung it on the hook that was fastened to the wall beside the shower. He brushed his teeth and turned the shower on, testing it before getting in.

"How long do you think Reed and the team will be held at Ravencroft?" asked Mary, as she stood there stirring the pancake mix in the bowl.

"I'm not sure. Reed said the team has been experiencing some adverse symptoms since surfacing. He had to end the call yesterday because he wasn't feeling well, which has me concerned. I know he's been through a lot, but he seemed off. I just hope he doesn't think that he's responsible for what happened," said Richard, as he plucked a grape off the vine of the fresh fruit Mary had set on the table.

"He's probably just concerned about everyone. I'm sure he's still struggling with what happened to Victor, especially being that Victor hasn't been on a deep-sea dive with the team in several years. He usually assists the team remotely from the docking ship. I'm sure there's a lot of factors playing into why he seemed off yesterday," said Mary.

"I suppose you're right. I'm sure it's been weighing on him," said Richard.

"What do you think will happen to the oceanography team if Victor doesn't return to Oscorp?" asked Mary, curiously.

"Why wouldn't he return to Oscorp?" asked Richard, staring at Mary, reluctant to take the thought into consideration.

“It was a traumatic experience, Richard; that alone can change a person’s life. He was severely burned on top of that experience. I just don’t know if I could return to it. I suppose that’s why I’m asking,” said Mary, feeling as though she may have upset Richard.

The topic was difficult for Richard to contemplate. It scared him to think that things at Oscorp wouldn’t be the same going forward. He felt on edge this morning. He tried to brush it off, thinking it was just the anxiety of finding out about Victor and knowing the team still hadn’t been medically discharged from Ravencroft.

“I have no idea how to break the news to Peter; he’s going to be devastated. It’s the end of the school year in a couple of weeks. All he's talked about lately is getting an internship under the oceanography team and what he’s going to specialize in for next year’s marine program. I don’t know how to tell him about what happened to Dr. Vondume. Maybe we should wait for them to formally announce it at Oscorp. It might be easier,” said Richard, indecisively.

Mary walked up behind Richard while he was sitting at the table. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed the top of his head.

“I’m sorry if what I said unsettled you. I know how close you are with Reed and everyone on the team. I’m sure Victor will return to Oscorp with the rest of the oceanography team once he’s recovered,” she said, knowing she had a tendency to be tactless when speaking her mind sometimes.

“It’s alright, I know where you’re coming from. To be honest, ever since Oscorp signed the new contract with the military, things haven’t felt right. Now, with what’s happened to Reed’s team, I can’t help but think it was a bad decision,” said Richard.

“All we can do right now is be there for them. Things will get better once they’re medically cleared and back at Oscorp,” said Mary, trying to ease Richard’s mind.

She put the pancakes and a bowl of fruit on the table. She set a plate in front of Richard and a plate down for Peter. She walked into the foyer and over to the staircase.

“Peter, breakfast is ready,” yelled Mary.

She walked over to the front door, opened it, and grabbed the Daily Bugle newspaper off the front porch.

She walked back to the kitchen, reading the headline on the front page.

“The last few days, all the headlines have been about is this serial killer, Carnage. Can’t they find something else to write about?” asked Mary, rhetorically.

She set the newspaper down on the table for Richard as Peter made his way down the stairs. He walked into the kitchen to find his breakfast on the table and went and sat beside his father.

"Did you give Gwen her copy of the research article that Dr. Richards signed?" asked Mary, trying to lighten the mood.

"Yeah, she couldn't believe it. She was so happy," said Peter, waiting for his mother to tease him as usual.

"Did you at least get a hug?" she asked, with a sly smile.

"Oh, come on, Mom," said Peter, embarrassed that his face had turned red from blushing.

Though he was rather proud of himself for coming up with the idea to get her a signed copy of the research article from Dr. Richards.

"What? It's a fair question," she said, playfully.

"Yes, alright, I got a hug," he said, bashfully.

"You are such a charmer, Peter Parker. Where does he get it from?" asked Mary, looking over at Richard.

Richard pretended to not be listening as he peered up from the newspaper.

"What was that, dear?" he asked, glancing over at Peter as he winked.

Peter couldn't help but smile.

"Do I get to work with you in the laboratory today, Dad? Dr. Zola is going to be working at Ravencroft, right?" asked Peter, who had felt alienated all week.

"Yes, you can work with me in the laboratory today, Peter," said Richard, knowing he had been uncharacteristically stern with Peter lately.

"Peter, eat your breakfast. Richard, go get in the shower or we're going to be late for work," said Mary, as she sat down to eat her breakfast now that everyone had been served.

She sat there quieter than usual, thinking how devastated Peter would be to find out that there had been an accident during the expedition. He had asked Richard earlier in the week why Oscorp hadn't announced anything about the expedition. Richard brushed it off, thinking it was because they didn't make a public announcement for this expedition. He told Peter it wasn't likely that they would announce anything unless they were to have a major breakthrough, like when they broke the depth record on their last expedition.

It feels wrong to keep it from him. He's an intelligent, mature boy.

Although he's still just a boy, she thought, sitting there eating her breakfast.

"Make sure you eat some fruit, Peter," she said, as she got up, rinsed her dish and put her plate in the dishwasher.

She went upstairs to get ready for work, following the routine they had become accustomed to over the years. Mary showered at night because she would make them breakfast in the morning. Peter sat at the table picking grapes off the vine while looking at the Daily Bugle newspaper headlines. Carnage was the talk of the city these days. He wondered what kind of monster could do such horrific things. His parents did their best to shelter him from the reality of the city they lived in, but he was aware of the kinds of things that regularly took place, especially having Gwen as a best friend. She was always asked questions about the atrocities that went on, due to her father being the Police Chief of New York City. She often played aloof to the questions they would ask, but Peter suspected she knew far more about things than she let on. He flipped the newspaper back over like his father had left it. He got up and rinsed his dish and put it in the dishwasher. He went upstairs, packed up his things, and set his backpack down at the foot of the stairway.

It was Friday. Peter intended to ask his father if he could call Dr. Richards when they got home to find out the next time he'd be at the laboratory on the weekend. He was hoping they could arrange a time to go pick up his sweater from Dr. Richards' office. He had left it there accidentally, giving him the perfect opportunity to go back and hear about the expedition. He figured if he could set up the visit with Dr. Richards in advance, he could tell Gwen when they were going, which would give her plenty of time to ask her parents if she could go with them. He had planned it all out, hopeful that her father wouldn't say no this time, although he hadn't fully considered when Dr. Richards would be at the laboratory again during the weekend. He was only there last weekend because he had to pick up some things before leaving for Guam. Peter was still frustrated that Gwen's father didn't let her go with them last time but was happy his plan to get her a signed copy of the research article Dr. Richards wrote worked out.

His parents made their way downstairs, discussing how it would be nice to have the laboratory to themselves today. They hadn't gotten used to Dr. Zola's presence just yet and were happy to have their space this morning. Peter, despite his desire to ask Dr. Zola about the mechanical device he wore, shared their sentiments. He was happy to be able to roam the laboratory freely as he always had, before Dr. Zola came to work with his parents at Oscorp. They grabbed their umbrellas before going to the car, as it was raining heavily. They splashed through the water as they ran down the driveway to the car, slamming the car door shut after getting into the vehicle.

"I honestly can't remember ever getting so much rain in one year,"

said Richard, as he took off his glasses to wipe the rain drops off them as they fogged up.

"Just take it slow. With this much rainfall it wouldn't take much to hydroplane," said Mary as she did up her seatbelt.

The traffic was heavier than usual due to the rain on their drive into work. They drove through Oscorp's security gate entrance and into the parking garage. They made their way inside Oscorp and passed through the main security checkpoint while Mr. Berkley greeted them. Peter headed to his classroom, while his parents made their way upstairs to the laboratory. They arrived to find Dr. Connors already in his office as Mary opened the door and turned the light on to the administration office. She hung her coat up, leaned the umbrella against the corner of the wall, and set her bag on the desk.

Richard opened the door to his office, hung his jacket up, and sat down at his desk. He was about to turn his computer on when Dr. Connors knocked on the door. Richard wasn't expecting anyone and was visibly startled, turning to see Curt in the doorway.

"Sorry to barge in on you, Richard. I need you to come take a look at this," said Curt, unable to contain his excitement.

"What is it?" asked Richard, as he got up and followed Dr. Connors into his office.

"Look at the blood sample results from the test subject that I administered the serum to a day ago," Dr. Connors exclaimed.

Richard examined the readings: the blood sample results showed an elevated rate of cellular regeneration. He looked over at Curt to find him holding the cage with the rodent test subject in it. The rodent had regrown its limb and was scurrying around the cage. Richard studied it for a moment and glanced up at Curt.

"Astounding! It appears to have regrown a viable replica of the limb that was amputated," said Richard.

In the past, Dr. Connors had a breakthrough with the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum, having a total of nine test subjects that had regrown their limbs. However, the rodents limbs that were amputated were not viable replicas. The limbs had not developed properly, and the serum had ultimately proven to be fatal. The subjects all died within sixty-eight hours of administration. Some of the subjects limbs were larger, some were smaller, but none had developed bone, only cartilage had formed in the regrown limbs.

"This time it worked, Richard. The limb is an exact replication of the original," said Dr. Connors, whose eyes were filled with tears of joy.

“We need at least a seventy-two-hour case study before we notify corporate,” said Richard, reminding Curt of the devastation he felt last time he notified corporate of a successful trial, only to be humiliated when the subjects died shortly after sending out the notification.

“I know. I don’t plan on making an announcement until we’re sure. In fact, I was hoping you could do me the honor if we get that far this time,” said Curt, still hesitant to put his reputation on the line after the last experience.

“Of course, Curt,” said Richard, knowing how much it meant to him.

Richard wasn’t emotionally attached to the project the way Curt was and had no issue with making the announcement if the trial successfully met the corporate requirements.

“I appreciate it, Richard. I’m going to write up my analysis of the results so everything’s prepared and ready to go,” said Dr. Connors.

“Congratulations, Curt. You deserve it. You’ve worked hard for this moment,” said Richard, sincerely.

He turned and walked back through the laboratory to his office. He stopped as he was about to go in and decided to go and share the news with Mary.

We could all use a bit of positive news since hearing about the accident that happened during the expedition, he thought, as he made his way over to the administration office.

Mary was sitting at her computer going over the end-of-quarter analytics, preparing a presentation for her corporate meeting at the end of the month when Richard knocked on the door. She turned to see him standing there.

“Hey, is everything okay?” she asked.

She had been feeling uneasy this morning and was concerned that maybe one of the team members from the Institution of Oceanography had taken a turn for the worse.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. I just thought I’d share a bit of good news. Curt had a successful trial with the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum,” said Richard.

“You’re kidding? That’s fantastic!” said Mary.

“If all goes well, we’ll be able to notify corporate Monday morning,” said Richard.

They both knew how much the project meant to Curt. It’s what he lived for these days.

“I don’t want to start celebrating too early. This is assuming there are no complications within the seventy-two-hour window, but let’s keep our fingers crossed for him,” said Richard, smiling warmly at his wife before turning and making his way back to his office.

He sat down at his desk and turned his computer on. As the system booted up, he found himself looking at a document that suddenly appeared on his computer screen. He wasn’t sure what it was, thinking maybe he had left something open or didn’t properly close a file last night before leaving the office. However, upon closer inspection, he noticed that the document had a classified stamp across it.

He began reading the contents of the document, realizing that it was Dr. Farley Stillwell’s analysis pertaining to Oscorp’s Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum. Confused, he read on, as the document stated that Dr. Stillwell had preclinically trialed the serum at Ravencroft and found it to be successful. The document indicated that a formal request had been sent to the Department Policy Board seeking approval to clinically trial the serum on inmates that were being held at Ravencroft’s Criminal Institution. Richard looked out the doorway of his office cautiously. He couldn’t believe what he was reading.

How did this get shared with me? he thought, trying to gather himself while his mind was racing.

He didn’t want to act rashly, knowing there were cameras just outside his office in the communal part of the laboratory. Ravencroft was likely monitoring them now, due to the security upgrades that were recently installed at Oscorp. He got up and walked out into the laboratory, trying to appear as casual as possible. He went and knocked on Curt’s office door, wondering if he had received the classified document as well.

”Come in,” said Curt, who was busy writing his analysis of the results that were taken from the subject’s blood samples.

“Sorry to interrupt. Did you happen to receive a shared PDF file this morning by chance?” asked Richard, studying Curt’s reaction to the question.

“A shared PDF file? No, I didn’t receive anything. Why, did you send something out accidentally?” asked Curt, curiously.

“No, never mind. I was just wondering if you had. Sorry to disturb you,” said Richard, as he turned and shut the door to Curt’s office.

He walked back to his office and sat down at the computer only to find the document was no longer on his computer. He tried running a search on all the documents that had recently been opened, but there was no trace of the classified PDF file. He got up and walked out into the laboratory and looked around, finding no one was in sight. He went to his wife’s office and

stood in the doorway, trying to make sense of what had happened.

"Hey, did you get a PDF file shared with you today when you turned your computer on?" asked Richard.

"A PDF file? Of what?" she asked, turning to look at him.

He shut the door to her office and stood there a moment contemplating how to tell her what he had just read.

"I don't know how, but I just turned my computer on, and as soon as it booted up, I received a shared PDF document. I wasn't sure what it was at first; I thought maybe I left something open when I shut my computer down yesterday. I started reading through it and noticed that there was a classified stamp across the page. The document was titled S.H.I.E.L.D. Human Enhancement Project. While I was reading, I realized that the analysis was written by Dr. Farley Stillwell from Ravencroft. He was one of the geneticists I met when Mr. Osborn and I had our meeting there," said Richard, quietly.

"I remember—you said he had an unsettling presence," said Mary, thrown off by the uncharacteristic demeanor of Richard.

"That's right— he made me feel uneasy. I continued reading the document, and it turned out to be Dr. Stillwell's analysis of a preclinical trial that he conducted at Ravencroft using Oscorp's Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum. It stated that they had a successful trial and that they had requested approval to conduct clinical testing on inmates that are being held at Ravencroft's Criminal Institution," said Richard, whispering as he spoke.

"Let me see it," said Mary, as she stood up.

"Well, that's just the thing: it's gone. I went to ask Curt if he received a shared PDF document this morning, thinking maybe it was sent out accidentally to all of us. He said he didn't receive anything. I could tell he had no idea what I was talking about; he was busy writing his analysis. When I went back to my office to read more, it had disappeared off of my computer. I checked my file history and ran a search for it: I couldn't find anything. It was there one minute, and the next, it was gone without a trace," whispered Richard, intensely.

"It's gone now?" asked Mary, confused as she tried to gauge her husband.

"I know it sounds crazy, but I know what I read, Mary," said Richard, while he stood there uncertain of how to prove it to her.

"Let's go look. Maybe we'll find something," said Mary.

Richard turned and opened the door to her office. They made their way through the laboratory and into Richard's office. He typed in his password, hoping that the file would be there, but there was nothing. He

looked through the history and ran a search on everything he could think of that might lead him to the PDF file, to no avail.

"Now what?" asked Mary, worried that Richard wouldn't be able to let this go.

"I don't know yet; I'm still deciding. I know the document was legitimate because it was Dr. Stillwell's analysis of Oscorp's Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum and had information about the criminal institution at Ravencroft that no one else knows about at Oscorp, other than Norman Osborn," whispered Richard.

Mary could see how intense Richard was and knew that nothing good was going to come from this.

"Okay, let's think about this for a minute, rationally. How do you think this classified PDF document came to you? Do you think it was sent by accident?" asked Mary, quietly.

"I have no idea, and to be completely honest, at this point, it doesn't matter. The question I think we need to ask ourselves is, what should we do now that we know what they're using our research for at Ravencroft?" asked Richard, as he stared at Mary intensely.

She stood there thinking for a moment, contemplating what her husband was asking.

"You realize that if we were to say something about this classified document that can no longer be found on your computer, it would be strictly allegations at this point," said Mary, unsure of what Richard expected them to do.

"I know that, Mary. I just don't know how we could turn a blind eye and continue to work here on the NeoGenics project when we know it's going to be clinically trialed on inmates at Ravencroft. This serum has proven fatal to every test subject that it has been administered to until now. One successful preclinical trial isn't enough to go off," whispered Richard.

"I agree with you, Richard, but we have no evidence of your claim without the classified document. It may have been shared with you accidentally and probably got retracted once they realized," speculated Mary.

"I need time to think. I know what I read: it was a classified military document. It makes me sick to think they're planning to test our research clinically. Trialing this serum on even the most sinister inmates at Ravencroft doesn't justify this. It's insanity, especially after seeing the effects the serum's had during preclinical trials. Most of the test subjects suffered greatly due to the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum being so aggressive. Do you remember me telling you that some of the subjects even began to physically mutate before they died?" asked Richard, feeling uncomfortable talking about it with Dr.

Connors present in the laboratory.

"I remember, Richard. We could blow the whistle here at Oscorp and see what Mr. Osborn says," said Mary, uncertain if that would be the best alternative.

"We can't take it to Mr. Osborn in the event that the classified document was intended for him," said Richard, quietly.

"You think he knows about what's going on at Ravencroft?" asked Mary.

"I think he knows more than he let on. He signed the contract with them and agreed to all the new security and software updates that have given Ravencroft access to Oscorp's research," whispered Richard.

"Then we'd have to go to the police or the media and blow the whistle on Oscorp to have them investigated. You realize that if we do this, Peter's education, his friends, our life at Oscorp, and everything we've worked for… is gone," said Mary, contemplating the cost of their decision.

"If we don't, can you live with yourself knowing what they're going to use our research for?" asked Richard, aware this decision would change their lives forever.

"They still have all our research, even if we leave and try to go public with this. You think we can stop them?" asked Mary.

"I don't know. All we can do is try. There's no point in deleting the files on my computer pertaining to my research. Ravencroft evidently has access to our database, and it would only draw attention. We'll make our move at the end of the day. We'll carry on like everything's normal until then. When Peter comes up to the laboratory, we'll collect the spiders from the terrarium and take them with us. I just did a count the other day. There aren't that many right now, there's only twenty-three," whispered Richard, aware that this sounded crazy.

"We can't take the spiders, Richard. They'll flag us as soon as we try to pass through security," said Mary, becoming concerned that Richard was actually serious about his intentions.

"At the end of the day, I want you to go to the garage and get the car. You can tell Mr. Berkley I'm just finishing up some work and that I'll be right down. Pull the car up out front of the security exit and wait for us. Peter and I will follow shortly after we've collected the spiders into a container. I'll let Peter hold them. Mr. Berkley won't suspect anything. I'll say that it's a project he's taking home. Before he has a chance to inspect the container, I'll be out the door with Peter," said Richard, trying to gauge Mary's reaction to his plan.

"Richard, we can't get Peter involved in this. We'll be arrested for theft if we take the spiders. Why not just go to the police?" asked Mary.

“After the spiders’ DNA was spliced and edited, I sequenced it with my DNA. If they were to map the species’ genome, they could potentially figure out how to use it for this Human Enhancement Project that they’re working on at Ravencroft,” whispered Richard.

“I don’t know, Richard… this is crazy. What are we going to do with the spiders if we manage to get past Oscorp’s security with them?” asked Mary.

“We’ll hand them over to the police and tell them we were concerned they would be used for these experiments,” said Richard, quietly.

Mary sat there a moment, thinking. She was worried that after reading through the classified document, Richard wasn’t in his right mind.

“This really doesn’t seem rational, Richard. I’m going to be completely honest with you,” she said, looking into her husband’s eyes.

“I know it doesn’t, but I can’t let them use our research for this Human Enhancement Project,” said Richard, as he stood up and wiped the sweat from his upper lip with the cuff of his sleeve.

“I don’t know if I can go through with this, Richard. I feel it’s going to end badly,” she whispered, as her eyes began to well up with tears.

“It’ll be alright. I promise, I’ll find a way to expose the truth,” he said, pulling her into his arms.

Mary wiped her face and looked at Richard intensely.

“We can’t get Peter involved,” she said, firmly.

“I agree. We’ll drop him at my brother’s place before we go to the police station,” said Richard.

She nodded and turned to open the door to his office. He grabbed her hand and turned her back to face him.

“I love you,” he said, softly.

“I love you, too,” she whispered, trying not to cry.

She left his office as he sat there devising a plan to try and shed light onto what he now believed was happening at Ravencroft. The more he thought about everything he had witnessed during the meeting at Ravencroft, the clearer the picture became: the non-disclosure agreements that were signed and the high-level security measures that seemed so unnecessary at the time. Everything made sense now that he knew what they were developing in the laboratories at Ravencroft.

The minutes seemed to crawl while he sat there in his office, unable to think about anything else, waiting for the day to come to an end. He felt sorry for Curt, knowing that he just had a breakthrough with the Reptilian

Gene Therapy Serum. It became evident to Richard why Ravencroft's successful trial coincidentally coincided with Oscorp's. Ravencroft was simultaneously conducting preclinical tests at their laboratory using the new serum batch that Dr. Connors had recently developed and successfully trialed. Richard surmised they must have wanted to conduct the tests at Ravencroft independently, where they would be free to experiment rather than rely on Dr. Connors' written analysis of the trials conducted at Oscorp. His head was spinning with countless scenarios. He wondered if they had been conducting experiments using the research he documented on the spiders.

Could Dr. Odo Zola be an Agency plant sent to gather intel on my research by working with me? He came off as extremely unassuming with a soft demeanor, making me feel sorry for him. I wouldn't have suspected it, but it could very well be possible, wondered Richard, suspiciously, as he got up and walked into the laboratory.

Curt's door was still closed; he was working diligently on completing the analysis of his successful preclinical trial. Richard walked over to the terrarium suspiciously, paranoid that Dr. Zola may have somehow tampered with or taken some of the spiders while he was caught up visiting with Mr. Osborn the other day. He counted the spiders, confirming all twenty-three were still there. He walked back to his office, uncertain of Dr. Zola, but was still guarded. He had felt that something was off since their meeting with the Colonel and his team. He thought about Reed and the rest of the oceanography team that had been experiencing adverse affects since the accident which happened after upgrading the submersible vessel at Ravencroft.

If only I had seen the classified document a week sooner, then maybe I could have prevented the accident, he thought.

With the workday finally nearing its end, he paced his office anxiously. He weighed how things may go once they were at the police station. Mary and Peter were in the administration office, while he prepared himself for what he would need to do. Richard told Peter he couldn't join him today because he was busy closing out his analysis with Dr. Connors. He was worried Peter might not understand his reasoning at first but justified his decision, believing it was the right thing to do. He walked to the administration office and stood in the doorway.

"Mary, go get the car and bring it around to the front just outside the security entrance. Peter and I will be down shortly," he said.

"Peter, go with your father," she said, as she grabbed her things and shut down her computer.

Peter walked out into the laboratory with Richard, somewhat

confused.

"What are we doing, Dad?" asked Peter, unaware of what his father had planned.

"Peter, I need you to take this container and gather every spider that's in the terrarium into it. There's twenty-three spiders in total; make sure you get them all. Can you do that for me?" asked Richard, as he handed Peter the small container.

"Alright, where are you going?" asked Peter, thrown off by his father's demeanor.

"I'm just going to have a word with Dr. Connors; I won't be long. Be quick about gathering the spiders for me, Peter," said Richard, as he headed toward Dr. Connors' office.

Peter watched his father walk away, wondering why he wanted the spiders to be put into a container, but did as he was asked and began to gather the spiders from the terrarium. Richard was concerned about Curt. He had known him since before Peter was born and watched him struggle with depression over the years. They had been on this journey together; it felt wrong to not tell him what he had seen.

Who knows what they'll tell him if it doesn't come from me, he thought, as he made his way to Curt's office.

He knocked on the door, uncertain what he would say to him, knowing how invested Curt was in the NeoGenics project.

"Come in."

"Sorry to disturb you, Curt. Would you mind if I have a word?"

"Not at all, come in," he said, as Richard walked into the office and shut the door behind him.

"This is difficult to explain. I'm aware that you just had a breakthrough with the serum, and the timing of this couldn't be worse, but something was brought to my attention today. If you recall, I came by earlier to ask if you had a PDF document shared with you this morning," said Richard.

"I recall the question. Did you figure it out?" asked Curt, somewhat confused by Richard's uncharacteristic awkwardness.

"This is going to sound crazy, but this morning I received a classified document on an analysis of Oscorp's Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum that had been preclinically trialed at Ravencroft. The analysis was written by a geneticist I met when Mr. Osborn and I had our meeting there named Dr. Farley Stillwell. The classified document was titled S.H.I.E.L.D. Human Enhancement Project. It stated that they had successfully conducted a

preclinical trial using Oscorp's Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum and that they would now move forward and request approval to conduct clinical trials on inmates that are being held at Ravencroft's Criminal Institution," said Richard, as he studied the disbelief on Curt's face.

"I don't understand; why would they send you this document?" asked Dr. Connors, who was still trying to process what Richard was saying.

"I don't think they meant to send it to me because when I went back to my office after I came and asked if you had received the shared PDF file this morning, it was gone. I couldn't find it in my document history. I tried searching through my PDF folders; I ran every search I could think of, but there was no record of it," said Richard, anxiously.

"What do you mean, it just disappeared on its own?" asked Curt, who had become visibly agitated.

"I don't understand it myself, Curt. I read through the file. It had a classified stamp across the document. I got up and went to your office to ask if you had anything shared with you, thinking maybe it was sent out by accident to everyone, and when I came back to my office a couple of minutes later, it was gone," said Richard, unsure if he had made the right decision in telling Curt.

"Okay, so what do you intend to do now?" asked Curt, confused.

"I think I'm obligated to blow the whistle and have Ravencroft investigated. I think you of all people can agree that this isn't something that can be clinically tested on human subjects. It was one successful preclinical trial. We've had years of preclinical trials that have ended in mutation and death," said Richard, hoping Curt would see the reasoning behind what he was saying.

"Don't do this, Richard. This could jeopardize both our careers, and the future of the NeoGenics project. I just had a breakthrough after over a decade of setbacks and disappointments. I'm begging you, don't do this," said Curt, desperately.

"Curt, this is bigger than the NeoGenics project. It's bigger than you, me, or some Nobel Prize," said Richard, trying to remain calm.

"You think I've spent the last decade working on this project for some damned Nobel Prize?" said Curt, angrily.

"I know why you've pursued this, Curt, but this serum is a long way from being ready for clinical trials. I can't imagine you'd disagree, based on the results we've had up until now," said Richard, trying his best to be civil with Curt.

"Why are you doing this, Richard? We have nothing to do with Ravencroft, or what they do with the research. Why are you taking it upon

yourself to decide our fate?" asked Curt, resentfully.

"So what you're saying is we should just ignore the fact that they're going to clinically trial our research when you know the effects it can have?" asked Richard, directly.

"You have no proof of this. Show me the evidence," said Curt, visibly frustrated.

"I already told you: it's gone. It must have been retracted once they realized they shared it with the wrong person," said Richard, trying to remain calm.

"That's mighty convenient, Richard. So you plan to blow the whistle with accusations and ruin both our careers? You have absolutely zero evidence," scoffed Curt.

"The document stated things that could be looked into if they were to investigate my claims," said Richard, in an attempt to make Curt understand.

"I'm asking you… I'm begging you, Richard. Don't do this; it's foolish. We'll only lose our funding and everything we've worked for," pleaded Curt.

"I'm sorry, Curt. I only came to tell you because I respect you, and I thought you should know what they plan on using our research for," said Richard, as he turned and opened the door to Curt's office, shutting it behind him.

He walked briskly into the laboratory toward the terrarium. His mind was racing, thinking he may have made a mistake telling Curt.

"Peter, how are we doing with those spiders?" asked Richard, anxiously.

Peter noticed right away that his father seemed nervous and stopped what he was doing to answer him.

"I've got nineteen by my count. They're quick little buggers, I don't want to hurt them," he said, wondering what was going on to have his father so visibly rattled.

"We need to go! You hear me? Get those spiders in that container, right now!" urged Richard, trying his best not to scare Peter.

He wanted to collect the spiders himself, but his body was trembling so badly from the adrenaline of knowing what he was about to do that he couldn't stop his hands from shaking. He looked around nervously; he was concerned that Curt, being upset from their discussion, might come out into the laboratory while they were gathering the spiders.

"Come on, Peter! hurry up!" insisted Richard, only making Peter

clumsier, as he tried to gather the remaining spiders.

"I'm trying to pick it up without… ouch!" he cried, jerking his hand back in pain.

"What happened?" asked Richard, looking at Peter intensely.

"It bit me!" said Peter, as he inspected his hand.

"Don't worry, their venom is harmless to humans. Come on, hurry up; there are two more," said Richard.

Peter gathered the remaining spiders into the container, and they made their way out of the laboratory.

"Dad, what's going on? Why are we taking the spiders?" asked Peter, realizing something was definitely wrong by the way his father was acting.

"I'll explain later. I don't want you to say anything when we go through security. Not one word. You understand me, Peter?" asked Richard, as he quickly walked down the corridor towards the stairs.

"I understand," said Peter, who was visibly shaken, having never witnessed his father behave in such a manner.

They quickly made their way down the stairs towards the security gate.

"Remember, don't say anything; I'll talk. I want you to pass through the gate with the container and go get into the car with your mother. I'll be right behind you. Don't set the container on the conveyor to be scanned, understand?" asked Richard, as they approached the gate.

Peter nodded, unsure what was happening as he walked beside his father. Mr. Berkley was at the inspection gate as usual, as they passed through the security check. Peter did as his father asked and held onto the container as they passed through the checkpoint.

"What's that you got there, Peter? You have to put that on the conveyor, so I can scan the contents," said Mr. Berkley.

Peter continued to walk, making his way towards the exit. Richard began talking, trying to give Peter time to get out of the building while giving Mr. Berkley a false explanation to prevent him from leaving the security booth to follow Peter.

"We're in a hurry, Mr. Berkley: there's been a family emergency. That's just a school project," said Richard, as he walked briskly toward the exit.

"Dr. Parker, I can't let you leave without scanning the container he's holding. Dr. Parker, wait!" yelled Mr. Berkley, as Richard ran out of the building, got in the car, and sped off toward the security gate that was closed.

“Richard, what are we going to do? Mr. Berkley has probably called ahead to the booth, they won’t let us past the security gate,” asked Mary, whose leg was shaking as she pressed the brake pedal.

“Just go through it; don’t stop,” said Richard, defiantly.

“Dad, what’s going on?” asked Peter, unable to comprehend his parents’ actions.

“I told you, I’ll explain later, Peter!” shouted Richard.

Mary pressed down on the gas pedal and ran through the barrier arm of the security gate as Peter screamed out in fear.

“Don’t be scared, baby. It’ll be alright,” said Mary, as her leg shook on the gas pedal while she turned onto the road.

They sped down the street and merged onto the freeway towards Richard’s older brother Ben’s house.

Curt sat alone in his office, playing back everything Richard said in his head, trying to make sense of it all.

Why would he pull something like this the day that I finally have a successful trial? Is it jealousy? I don’t understand. We’ve worked together for over a decade with a common goal. Now, he seems intent on destroying everything we’ve worked for over a classified file that was allegedly shared by accident. He has no proof of this—he said it himself. He has no basis to go off, yet he’s intent on ruining our careers by trying to fuel some investigation based on speculation. If he does this, they’ll shut the project down or move it to Ravencroft, thought Curt, anxiously, as he sat there.

He got up from his desk and went out into the laboratory. It was quiet; everyone had left for the day. Curt knew Richard well enough to know that he wasn’t one for over-the-top antics or unnecessary drama. If he said he was going to do something, he meant it. He took a needle and syringe from the cabinet, then went over to the refrigerated unit. He opened it and took a vial of the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum that had been successfully trialed. He put the vial in his lab coat pocket and retrieved a piece of equipment from the laboratory that was used to assist him with holding the vial securely in place before going back into his office.

What choice have you left me? You might be willing to throw everything that we’ve worked for away, but I won’t let you take this from me, he thought, desperately.

He sat down at his desk as tears streamed down his face, wondering why Richard would do this to him. After everything he had been through in his life, he finally had a glimmer of hope, and the day he achieved his longtime dream, it was being taken from him. He picked up the phone and dialed his ex-wife’s home number as he tried to compose himself.

“Hello?” answered Martha.

“Martha, it’s Curt. Sorry to disturb you. Is William there?” asked Curt, trying to suppress his emotions.

“Curt? No, he’s not home. Is everything alright?” she asked, as Curt had not been a part of their lives for nearly two decades, other than paying child support and sending birthday and Christmas gifts every year.

“Everything’s fine. I just wanted to check in. Look, Martha, I’m sorry I haven’t been there for you and William. Tell him I love him,” said Curt, as he hung up the phone abruptly.

He stood up and removed his lab coat. He untucked his dress shirt from his pants and unbuttoned it. He grabbed the unopened package off his desk and opened it, taking out the needle. He set the device he used to assist with holding the vial in front of him on the desk and locked the vial in place. He picked up the needle, carefully inserting it into the rubber top of the vial. He depressed the plunger, pushing air into the vial to keep a vacuum from forming, so that the serum would flow easily into the syringe. He extracted the contents of the vial and closed his eyes as tears ran down his cheeks. He inhaled deeply as he inserted the needle into his vein, depressing the syringe containing the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum directly into his bloodstream. The serum would be taken up by the cells, delivering the reptilian gene to them. This approach was used to target various organs, with the serum circulating in the blood until it reaches the desired cells. The immune tolerogenic properties of the liver facilitate long-term expression, providing the prevention of an immune response against the reptilian genes and foreign antigens.

He removed the needle, exhaling deeply, feeling the effects of the serum almost instantly. He buttoned up his shirt and gathered his things. He threw the needle, syringe, and wrapper in his desk drawer and locked it before shutting the light out and closing his office door. He returned the equipment he had taken from the laboratory and made his way over to the temperature-controlled unit to put the empty vial back in the refrigerator. He then proceeded to leave the laboratory, wondering if this would be the last time he’d ever see it again. His body felt hot as he walked down the stairs, making his way to the security check. Mr. Berkley was on the phone but came out as soon as he saw Dr. Connors approaching.

“I might need a statement of what took place in the laboratory today,” said Mr. Berkley.

Curt immediately thought they had seen him take the serum from the refrigerated unit on the cameras in the laboratory, but remained calm, realizing Richard may have already tried to blow the whistle on Ravencroft.

“What’s going on?” asked Curt, as he walked towards Mr. Berkley.

“We just had an incident here that we’re investigating. Can you put your briefcase on the conveyor and step through the security scanner please, Dr. Connors?” asked Mr. Berkley, intensely.

“Of course,” said Dr. Connors, who was already beginning to feel unwell.

Mr. Berkley went through the contents of Dr. Connors’ briefcase, which was not typical protocol. Usually, the bag or briefcase was put onto the conveyor and scanned when entering and leaving the building. However, Mr. Berkley thoroughly searched through Dr. Connors’ briefcase, then went back into the security office, picked up the phone and made a call. A few moments later he came out and apologized to Dr. Connors for the inconvenience and the invasive search of his belongings, but due to the investigation, it was mandated. Dr. Connors accepted his apology and exited the building relieved, making his way to the parking garage. He got in his vehicle and sat there a moment, feeling nauseous. Aware there were cameras in the garage, he tried his best to appear as though he was fine. He started his car and drove out of the parking garage. He had broken out into a cold sweat and looked extremely pale. He approached the security gate, seeing that it had been completely destroyed. It was raining heavily as he cracked his window to get a better look. There was a team of police officers and men dressed in suits holding umbrellas speaking with the security guard outside the gate. He wondered if all this could have been his long-time partner’s doing.

Richard, what have you done? he thought, rolling down his window nervously as the rain splashed off the car door onto his face.

They watched him as he scanned his badge, then waved him through. He pulled out of the parking lot and drove down the street. He made his way to the stoplight. The heavy rain hitting the windshield made it difficult to see, and his head began to spin.

I just need to get home; I’m almost there, he thought, as he began feeling nauseous.

He opened the door to his car and leaned out, vomiting onto the street. Tears ran down his face as he heaved several times. Seeing that the light had changed, he sat up, shut the car door, and sped off quickly. He managed to make it home as he pulled into the driveway and stumbled out of his vehicle. He opened the door to his townhouse, shaking and soaking wet. He went into his room, shut the door, and collapsed onto his bed.

Mary pulled up in front of Ben’s driveway. She turned to Peter and looked at him, trying to be strong.

“Go with your father, Peter. You’re going to visit with your Uncle Ben and Aunt May until we get back,” she said, fighting back tears.

“Mom, where are you going?” asked Peter, visibly emotional.

“We’ll be back soon, sweetie. We just have to handle something urgently. We won’t be too long. Be a good boy and go with your father,” she said, as she grabbed his hand.

Peter couldn’t comprehend what was going on, but knew his parents, and had never witnessed either of them behave so out of character. Richard got out of the car and walked Peter up the driveway and rang the doorbell. Ben’s wife, May, answered the door, surprised to see Richard and Peter standing there in the rain.

“Richard, Peter—what a surprise! Come in out of the rain,” said May, as she opened the door to their small home.

“I’m sorry to just show up out of the blue like this, May. Is Ben here?” asked Richard.

“He’s upstairs. I’ll go get him,” said May.

Peter stared at his father in silence. He had never seen him so intense before. Ben came downstairs, seeing Richard and Peter standing in the hallway, soaking wet.

“Richard, is everything okay?” asked Ben, as he made his way down the last few steps.

“Peter, go visit with your Aunt May while I talk to Uncle Ben for a minute,” said Richard.

Peter did as he was asked. He took his shoes off and went upstairs to visit with his Aunt May. He knew better than to irritate his father any further by asking more questions. Ben walked over to Richard, concerned.

“What’s going on?” asked Ben, directly.

“I can’t say too much right now, Ben. I don’t want to get you involved in this. All I can tell you is we’re headed to the police station. Can you watch Peter until Mary and I handle the situation we’re in?” asked Richard.

Ben was shocked. He looked at his brother, who appeared visibly anxious.

“Are you in some kind of trouble, Richard? Tell me what happened,” asked Ben, who was becoming increasingly concerned.

“I have to go, Ben. There’s no time. Please, look after Peter for me,” said Richard, as he looked at Ben desperately.

Ben could tell that his brother was scared. He wanted to know what was going on but agreed to look after Peter.

“I’ll call you as soon as I can,” said Richard, as he turned and opened the door.

Ben stood in the doorway, watching his brother splash through the rain as he ran to the car. He got in the passenger side of the vehicle before Mary sped off down the road. Ben shut the door and went upstairs to find May showing Peter an old photo album of Ben and Richard when they were children.

"Is everything okay, Ben?" asked May, as Ben stood in the hallway just outside the bedroom.

He walked to the bedroom and stood in the doorway.

"Everything's fine. Peter's going to visit with us until Richard and Mary finish running some important errands," said Ben, uncertain if Peter knew what was going on.

Mary had the windshield wipers on maximum, but it was raining so hard that she still had difficulty seeing. Traffic was getting worse as she raced down the street, trying to avoid rush hour. Suddenly, a car swerved in front of them and stopped unexpectedly. She slammed on the brakes as the car slid, nearly slamming into the vehicle. She jerked the wheel to the right, narrowly missing the car as the tires went up onto the curb. She let out a scream but managed to regain control of the vehicle.

"Jesus Christ, what the hell was that guy thinking?" yelled Richard, as they continued down the road, shaken from the incident.

Mary realized the car that had cut them off was speeding up behind them and approaching quickly.

"Richard, I think they're chasing us! They're coming up behind us, fast!" she said, as her heart was pounding.

Richard turned in his seat to try and get a look at the car approaching.

"I can't see a thing with this bloody rain," he said, as he rolled down the window to try and get a better view of the vehicle in the passenger side mirror.

"Are they the police?" asked Mary, nervously.

Richard was still trying to get a look at the vehicle as it came up behind them. They were dangerously close, considering how hard it was raining.

"There are two of them in the vehicle. They don't look like police. They're in an unmarked car, and it looks like they're wearing suits," he said, wondering if they could have been sent by Ravencroft.

"What should I do? They're coming up beside us now!" asked Mary, as she watched the car approaching in the driver's side mirror.

“Get on the highway here!” he shouted, hoping they wouldn’t be able to make the cut off, being a lane over.

She swerved onto the entrance ramp at the last second in an attempt to lose them, just missing the rail. Her body was trembling as she fought back the tears that welled up in her eyes.

“You did it! We lost them,” said Richard, trying to relieve Mary, who was visibly shaken.

“Why are they chasing us? This is crazy, Richard! We shouldn’t have taken the spiders,” she cried, as they sped down the freeway.

“It’s alright. It just proves what I was saying was right. These are bad people, Mary. We just need to get to the exit; we’re almost at the police station,” Richard said, anxiously.

“Oh my God… is that them coming up behind us?” asked Mary, nervously, as her eyes darted back and forth between the rearview and side mirrors.

Richard turned in his seat, trying to see out the back window as the car quickly approached.

“You have got to be kidding me,” he said in disbelief, trying to think of what to do next.

Tears streamed down Mary’s face uncontrollably as she pushed down the pedal in an attempt to escape the vehicle that pursued them.

“What should I do?” she cried, as her heart pounded and her body trembled.

“Get in the far-right lane; we’ll get off at the next exit!” shouted Richard, urgently, as he tried to navigate in his mind how to get to the police station from where they were.

The two men raced up behind them, ramming into the back of their car as Mary tried to maintain control of the vehicle. Richard turned in his seat, trying to get a look at the two men so he could give a description or identify them when they got to the police station and reported the incident.

“Keep going! We’re almost at the cut off,” said Richard, tensely.

The two men intensely pursued them, seeming intent on running them off the road. Mary’s leg shook while pressing the gas pedal. The vehicle sped up past them and suddenly swerved in front of them. She jerked the steering wheel to the right to avoid hitting the vehicle, causing the car to skid sideways as she slammed on the brakes, but was unable to regain control of the vehicle. They slid across the wet pavement, hitting the gravel on the side of the highway, sending them down into the drainage ditch, flipping the vehicle, and launching them through the air. The car flipped again, while

Richard and Mary were thrown around violently in their seats as the container holding the spiders burst open from the impact. The vehicle was sent tumbling until it finally came to a stop, upside down on the side of the highway.

The two men pulled off onto the gravel, where they got out of the vehicle and approached the wreck. One of the men knelt down and peered in through the shattered window to find Richard and Mary unconscious and unresponsive, both appearing to be severely injured. The other man searched the vehicle for the container only to find it had broken opened from the impact of the accident. Despite their efforts, they couldn't locate any of the spiders amongst the dirt, debris, and shattered glass in the demolished vehicle. Sirens could be heard approaching as drivers on the highway began to slow down to get a look at the horrible wreckage. The two men casually walked back to their vehicle. They got in and drove off as an ambulance raced down the highway toward the scene of the accident behind them.

A few hours later, May was busy in the kitchen preparing dessert, as they had just finished eating dinner. Peter sat in the living room with his Uncle Ben talking about the marine program that he was going to be enrolling in next year at Oscorp. The phone rang as May walked over to where it hung on the wall, wiped her hands on the towel she had over her shoulder, and answered it.

"Hello?" said May.

"Good evening, ma'am. Is this the residence of Mr. Ben Parker?" asked the lady on the phone.

"Yes, it is. May I ask who's calling?"

"It's the hospital center, ma'am."

A feeling of dread struck May as she put the phone down and walked into the living room. Ben was mid-sentence as she stood there silent. He looked over at her and immediately knew something was wrong.

"What is it?" he asked, as he stood up slowly.

"The hospital is on the phone," she said, as she stared blankly at him.

Peter stood up, feeling a wave of emotion, as he anticipated what it could be about. Ben walked into the kitchen and picked up the phone.

"Hello?" said Ben, nervously.

"Good evening, sir. Am I speaking to Mr. Ben Parker?" asked the lady.

"Yes, this is him," said Ben.

"This is the Hospital Center Coroner's Office calling. We regret to inform you that Richard and Mary Parker were in a motor vehicle accident

this evening and were pronounced dead at the scene. I'm terribly sorry, sir. They'll be held here at the hospital center, if you could please arrange to come and identify the victims," said the woman.

He couldn't believe what he was hearing as tears streamed down his face. He looked at Peter, standing in the doorway of the kitchen. Peter fell to knees, realizing that something terrible had happened. Ben hung up the phone and went over to Peter, picking him up off his knees and hugging him.

"Your parents were in a car accident. I'm so sorry, Peter… they're gone," sobbed Ben, as he struggled to get the words out.

Peter's legs buckled and gave out from under him as Ben held him tightly. Devastated, May went over and put her arms around them as they wept.

Following the security breach at Oscorp, Mr. Berkley adhered to company protocol, alerting Ravencroft's Intelligence Department. They immediately dispatched agents to investigate the breach at Oscorp. Norman received a call from the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency notifying him of the incident, and those who were involved. They briefed Norman on what Mr. Berkley reported concerning Richad Parker's security breach while leaving Oscorp's facility. They also informed him of what they discovered after pulling the video footage from the laboratory, revealing that he had the spiders in his possession. He couldn't believe what he was being told as he sat there contemplating the implications of their actions.

"Has Colonel Fury been informed of the situation?" asked Norman, feeling the tension in his neck from the stress he was under.

"Colonel Fury has been notified, sir," said the agent on the phone.

"Thank you," said Norman, as he hung up the phone.

He got up from his desk, went to his liquor cabinet, and poured himself a glass of whiskey. His mind was racing as he paced his office.

How many things can go wrong in the span of a few weeks? he thought, as he shot back the whiskey.

He couldn't help but think that ever since they became involved with the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency, one thing after another had gone wrong. It was as though a dark cloud had been cast over Oscorp.

I should have realized after the briefing all the problems that came with the Human Enhancement Project, he thought, regretting having signed the new contract with the Agency.

He walked back over to the liquor cabinet and poured himself another drink.

First, I lose Reed and his team from the Institution of Oceanography. Now I'm losing half the goddamn genetics department. Why would Richard do this? What could he have wanted with the spiders? It doesn't make sense. Richard is a logical man; he wouldn't have done something like this without a reason, thought Norman, confused by the actions of the quirky geneticist.

He finished his whiskey and walked down to the security checkpoint booth to find Mr. Berkley still giving his statement to the Agency's Intelligence Department over the phone. When Mr. Berkley noticed Mr. Osborn standing there, he immediately stood up and asked the person on the line to hold.

“Mr. Osborn, I’m sorry. Things happened so quickly. I didn’t have a chance to react to the situation,” said Mr. Berkley, nervously.

“It’s alright, Mr. Berkley. I wouldn’t have seen that coming from Dr. Parker either. I’m told he left with the spiders,” said Norman.

“I’m not sure what he had in the container, sir. I asked his son Peter to set the container down on the conveyor, but he ignored my request and left the building. Dr. Parker followed behind him, insisting it was just a school project and that they had to leave due to a family emergency,” said Mr. Berkley.

“What about Dr. Connors?” asked Norman.

“He left the facility approximately thirty minutes after they did, without incident, sir. He was scanned, and his belongings were thoroughly searched, before exiting the premises,” said Mr. Berkley.

“Very well. Carry on,” said Norman, as Mr. Berkley nodded and resumed his call with the Intelligence Department.

Norman made his way back to his office, expecting to hear from Colonel Fury concerning the legal ramifications following the incident with Richard Parker.

Richard would have known that the repercussions of his actions would undoubtedly be severe. Getting his family involved on top of everything seems extremely uncharacteristic. I just don’t see what would have caused him to act so rashly, thought Norman, frustrated by the situation.

The incident involving the team from the Institution of Oceanography was unexpected and, in and of itself, stressful, potentially leaving the department’s future in jeopardy. However, the sea is unpredictable. It was an accident due to faulty equipment, which happens quite often in that line of work. He never would have believed that he would have to deal with an internal security breach concerning his senior staff members at Oscorp. He poured himself another whiskey, contemplating whether he should get in touch with Colonel Fury. He was sick with the thought of trying to explain what could have been the cause for Dr. Parker’s actions.

We shouldn’t have included him in the meeting at Ravencroft. I had a bad feeling about it. I should have said no, dammit, he thought, while he paced back and forth.

The phone rang, startling Norman. He picked up the receiver anxiously.

“What is it?”

“Mr. Osborn, Colonel Fury is on line one,” said his secretary.

He felt his neck tighten up from the stress as he pressed the button

to take the call.

"Colonel Fury, I've just been informed of the security breach regarding Dr. Parker. I haven't determined why he would do something like this, but I can assure you, I'll get to the bottom of it," said Norman, as the Colonel interjected before he could continue speaking.

"Mr. Osborn, I have some unfortunate news. Richard and Mary Parker were killed in a motor vehicle accident. They were pronounced dead at the scene forty-five minutes ago, according to the coroner's report," said the Colonel.

"Dead?" gasped Norman, feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand up and a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"I'm sorry," said Colonel Fury.

"I don't understand what could have happened to cause them to do this," said Norman, blankly, his mind still trying to comprehend everything.

"It's being investigated. I know they were a big part of your team. I'm sure you must be devastated. Go home and get some rest. We'll be in touch when we have more information," said the Colonel.

He hung up the phone and stood there for several minutes, staring off, uncertain of Oscorp's future going forward. He collected his belongings and instructed his secretary to have his driver wait out front. He went to the liquor cabinet and poured himself another whiskey. His head was already rather light. He hadn't eaten much, and it was hitting him harder than usual, but he needed something to numb his mind.

He said Richard and Mary Parker were pronounced dead, he thought, wondering if their son survived the accident.

It was too much to think about at the moment. He suddenly felt like he needed to get out of there. He was jittery and didn't feel well. He walked down the corridor, past the security gate, to the front exit where his car waited. He got in and uncharacteristically buckled his seat belt.

"Take me home," he said, as he stared blankly out the window.

The next morning, he woke to the sound of rain tapping on the glass of his Upper Manhattan mansion as he lay there, thinking about everything that had happened. He got up, walked to his bathroom, and washed his face, feeling hungover. His head was pounding, seemingly with every beat of his heart, as he walked back to his night table and grabbed the bottle of ibuprofen. He could think of nothing else but what had happened. He wondered where Oscorp's NeoGenics program would go from here now that Richard and Mary Parker were dead. They had Dr. Connors' Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum, but that was still being developed in preclinical trials.

He pressed the intercom on the wall. “Bring me up some coffee,” he said, as he opened his bedroom door and picked the paper up that had been set there for him.

“It’s being brought up to you now, Mr. Osborn,” said the chef over the intercom.

The maid brought a fresh pot up to his room and set his morning table, which was situated directly in front of his bedroom window. She poured his coffee as he sat there reading through the paper. He wondered how he should handle the news regarding the death of Richard and Mary Parker at Oscorp on Monday. He knew there was a chance the news of their death could have already gotten out. Their death was an unfortunate accident, which Oscorp had no control over, and he still wasn’t sure how he would explain the loss of the spiders to the rest of the genetics department. He sat there in silence, sipping his coffee as the maid finished making his bed. She left the bedroom, shutting the door behind her. He felt emotional, although he wasn’t sure why; he wasn’t particularly fond of Richard Parker.

Perhaps I’m just sad that Oscorp’s NeoGenics project has died along with Richard Parker, thought Norman, coldly.

He was bitter that Richard had taken the spiders from Oscorp.

Parker’s recklessness not only cost him and his wife their lives, but his research and everything else they had accomplished at Oscorp was lost too, he thought, scornfully.

Despite his frustration, he had reluctantly decided he would manage the financial responsibilities for the funeral. His emotions towards Richard were mixed; he was angry and felt betrayed but was still uncertain of what happened. The gesture was Norman’s way of paying his respects. He had his assistant, Bernard, call the hospital to inquire whether Richard and Mary’s son had been injured in the accident. He was informed that Peter was not in the hospital or in the vehicle at the time of their death. He wondered where the boy was. He finished his coffee and grabbed his towel as he prepared to take a shower. He needed to know what had happened.

He suddenly remembered that Mr. Berkley had informed him that Peter was holding the container that had the spiders in it.

There’s still a chance that the spiders are with him somewhere. I’ll reach out to the Colonel and let him know, he thought, as he turned the shower faucet on, needing to sober up and clear his head first.

He finished getting ready and went downstairs. The ibuprofen hadn’t alleviated his headache, making it difficult to think. He had his chef prepare a fresh bowl of fruit for him. He still felt nauseous and needed something to shake his hangover. He finished the fruit and pulled the card from his wallet

that Agent Dugan left him in the event he ever needed to get a hold of someone outside normal working hours. He dialed the number and waited, uncertain of what to expect.

"Good morning. You've reached the call center. Is there someone I can put you through to?" asked the operator.

"Good morning. I'd like to speak with Colonel Fury, please," said Norman.

"May I ask who's calling?" asked the operator.

"Norman Osborn," he said, anxiously, as the operator told him to hold on the line.

He sat there waiting for a few minutes until the call was transferred.

"Good morning, Mr. Osborn. I imagine you're calling in regard to yesterday's security breach," said the Colonel.

"Good morning, Colonel Fury. Sorry to disturb you on a Saturday. Yes, that is the reason for my call. I know that your team is thoroughly investigating the matter, but I had my assistant call the hospital to find out the condition of Richard and Mary's son, Peter, who I'm sure you're aware was with them at the time of the security breach. My security screening officer informed me that Richard's son was holding the container with the spiders at the time of the security breach," said Norman.

"That's correct. The footage showed the boy leaving the facility with the container. I was informed the boy was dropped off at Dr. Parker's older brother's home before the accident occurred. We reviewed the police statement that was taken, and we sent a team over this morning to gather more intel regarding the security breach. Unfortunately, my team confirmed that the container carrying the spiders was destroyed in the car wreck. The spiders were unretrievable," said the Colonel.

Norman was devastated by the news, and the hope he had of continuing the project was lost in the Colonel's words.

"You're certain? Were there any spiders found dead in the container that could be retrieved?" asked Norman.

"No, the container was destroyed and confirmed empty when the vehicle was inspected by my team after the accident. Despite our efforts we weren't able to locate any of the spiders in the grass where the vehicle had flipped several times," said the Colonel.

"I see. That's unfortunate," said Norman, unaware of the severity of the accident.

"I'll update you Monday morning on the statement my team gets from Dr. Parker's brother concerning the incident," said the Colonel.

"Thank you, Colonel Fury. I appreciate it," said Norman, as he hung the phone up.

Norman felt sorry for the boy, who would now be without his parents.

His world will forever be changed on account of his father's rash, impulsive decision, thought Norman, resentfully.

He wanted a drink but overdid it yesterday evening and was still feeling hungover. He went upstairs to his son Harry's room and knocked on the door.

"Come in," said Harry, who was awake but was still lying in bed.

"Sorry, I didn't realize you were still sleeping," said Norman, as he turned to shut the door.

"No, I'm up. I was just lying here, listening to the rain," said Harry, as he sat up to hear what his father had come to talk to him about.

It was a rare occurrence when his father would initiate a conversation with him. Norman usually left the task to his assistants due to the fact that whenever he looked at his son, it would cause him to think of his late wife.

"I came to inform you of some unfortunate news I received regarding Dr. Parker and his wife. I believe you spent some time with their son, Peter, during the Festivities Event recently. They were killed in an automobile accident yesterday. Luckily, their son wasn't in the vehicle at the time of the accident," said Norman.

"Really? What's going to happen to Peter now?" asked Harry, shocked by the news.

"I was informed he's with his relatives. He'll be okay. I just didn't want you to hear from someone else on Monday," said Norman.

"Will Peter still be going to school at Oscorp?" asked Harry.

Norman looked at Harry a moment. He hadn't considered the question until now. He shook his head, looking down at the ground.

"No. I don't believe that will be possible," said Norman.

"If Peter can't go to school at Oscorp, where will he go?" asked Harry.

"I don't know. I have to go; I have some important business to attend to," said Norman, as he shut the door to Harry's bedroom.

He contemplated whether telling Harry was the right decision, considering he wasn't sure what the Agency would find during their investigation into the security breach. The day seemed to drag on, spending most of it isolated in his thoughts. Norman was anxious, knowing that the news of Richard and Mary Parker's deaths would need to be addressed at

Oscorp on Monday. He spent Saturday evening and all of Sunday writing an obituary, preparing to announce the couple's unfortunate passing, and highlighting their achievements at Oscorp. He figured the Agency would require time to investigate the matter and would inform him of how they wanted to handle it. He imagined that they would try and keep it under wraps, rather than draw attention, like they did with the oceanography team.

Norman woke to the sound of his alarm on Monday morning. His maid knocked lightly on his bedroom door before entering with the newspaper, a bowl of fruit, and a fresh pot of coffee. She opened the curtains and set his morning table while he got up and washed his face. He sat down and opened the Daily Bugle newspaper to see the headline, "Nobel Prize-Winning Geneticist Commits Treason."

Norman's heart began to race as he read through the article: "Dr. Richard Parker and his wife, Mary Parker, died tragically in a car accident last week. Richard Parker was best known for creating the first and only genetically engineered species to reproduce. However, the Nobel Prize winning geneticist is now suspected of treason. Authorities are linking the investigation to an international terrorist organization. There has been speculation that there was an attempt to transfer sensitive research to a foreign entity."

This doesn't make sense… we haven't completed the investigation. Where did the media get this information? wondered Norman.

He hadn't even had time to deal with this internally, and it was already out there for the public. He got up and grabbed the phone off the table, calling the only person he could trust that might have some insight into this: his close friend, Chief Stacy. He dialed his home phone number, aware it was early, but figured his family was likely up already.

"Hello?" said Mrs. Stacy, as Norman shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Good morning, Helen. It's Norman Osborn. I'm terribly sorry to be calling so early. May I speak with George, please?" asked Norman, as politely as possible.

"Good morning, Norman. Not to worry at all, he's just getting ready for work. I'll go get him," she said, as Norman thanked her.

"Norman, is everything alright?" asked George, who wasn't used to Norman calling his home at this hour.

"Good morning, George. Forgive me for calling so early. I saw the newspaper this morning and figured you might be able to give me some insight as to who leaked this story to the media," said Norman.

"Newspaper? Sorry Norman, I haven't seen the paper today. What's

going on?" asked George.

Norman was thrown off that George didn't seem to be aware of what happened.

"We had a security breach at Oscorp on Friday involving Richard and Mary Parker," said Norman.

"Involving Richard and Mary Parker?" gasped George, trying to comprehend what Norman was saying while his mind raced with questions.

"They were killed in car accident following the security breach and we lost some sensitive research that was in the vehicle," said Norman.

Norman trusted George completely, telling him what happened without hesitation. George stood there shocked, with his hand over his mouth.

"The Parker's were killed? What about their son?" asked George, worried he was going to have to give his daughter the worst news of her life.

"He's fine. Parker dropped the boy off at his brother's house less than an hour before the accident occurred," said Norman.

"Thank goodness. The poor kid," said George, still trying to process the news.

"I opened the Daily Bugle newspaper this morning and saw that there was an article about the incident. I was hoping you could tell me who leaked the story to the media, but it doesn't sound like you know anything about it," said Norman, disappointedly.

"This is the first I'm hearing of the incident. It definitely didn't come from the police department. What did the newspaper article say?" asked George, curiously.

"That they conspired to commit treason with an international terrorist organization. They speculate that they were attempting to transfer sensitive research to a foreign entity. I just find it strange that they would print these allegations without it being thoroughly investigated," said Norman.

"Why would J. Jonah Jameson run a story without it coming from a credible source? I know him quite well; that's not like him at all," said Chief Stacy, thinking the allegations didn't fit the Parkers.

"I don't know. None of this makes any sense. I appreciate you taking the time for me this morning, George. Let me know if you hear anything at the station about who leaked the story," said Norman.

"I'll definitely let you know if I hear anything," said George, hanging up the phone as he prepared to give his daughter the sad news.

Norman went to get ready for work. He was anxious to find out how the story got leaked to the media. He grabbed his towel and pressed the button on the intercom.

"Bernard, have the car ready out front; I need to leave earlier than usual," said Norman, still dwelling on what he read in the newspaper.

"Of course, sir," replied Bernard over the intercom.

Why would they print something that's purely based on speculation? he thought, as he got in the shower.

Nothing made sense. He quickly got ready and left for the office. When he arrived, he was surprised to see a small group of media outside the gate of Oscorp.

"Bernard, call the security desk and inform them I want these people off the property," said Norman, who was trying his best to contain his frustration.

"Certainly, Mr. Osborn," he said, as they drove through the security gate.

Norman got out of the vehicle and walked through the main entrance into Oscorp. He passed through the security check and made his way down the corridor. He greeted his secretary as he walked to his office, tapping his security card to the panel and looking through the retinal scan. He set his things down and turned on his computer, wasting no time to pull up the security footage from Friday.

On Friday morning, Dr. Connors was seen entering the laboratory. He set his things in his office and then, for a short period, was monitored at his workstation before going back to his office. Shortly after that, Richard and Mary Parker arrived at the laboratory and were observed going to their offices. Everything appeared normal at the start of the day. Dr. Connors was spotted going to Dr. Parker's office. The two of them were then observed going back to Dr. Connors' office for a short period. Dr. Parker was monitored leaving Dr. Connors' office and going back to his office but didn't enter; he stopped outside it and instead went to the administration office, where he spent a few minutes before exiting. He then went back to his office, where he spent approximately five minutes before he was observed going back to Dr. Connors' office. He spent a brief moment standing in the doorway of Dr. Connors' office talking to him, then went back to his office. A few minutes later, he was spotted walking out into the laboratory, seeming somewhat out of sorts as he looked around, appearing confused. He then made his way back to the administration office, where he was seen shutting the door. Shortly after, both he and Mary were observed leaving the administration office and going back to his office. Norman noted the time, as they spent approximately twenty minutes in Richard's office before she left and returned

to the administration office.

Norman noticed their lack of presence in the laboratory. They spent the remainder of the day in their offices, except for a brief moment when Richard came out of his office and peered into the terrarium for a few minutes before returning to his office for the rest of the day. Richard's son was seen entering the laboratory just after 3pm, which was a normal occurrence. He was observed entering the administration office, where he remained until Mary left the laboratory and exited the building to the parking garage. Peter was then seen accompanying Richard through the laboratory. Richard was observed taking a container from the cabinet and handing it to Peter. Richard then appeared to give Peter instructions to remove the spiders from the terrarium.

Peter appeared confused. I don't think he knew what was going on, thought Norman, as he continued watching the security footage.

Peter began to remove the spiders as Richard went to Dr. Connors' office. Dr. Parker was seen knocking, entering the office, and shutting the door behind him. He spent approximately ten minutes in the office.

Why'd he shut the door? He didn't do that in the morning when he went to his office to talk. He only shut the door when he went to Mary's office, thought Norman suspiciously.

He was then spotted leaving Dr. Connors' office and going back through the laboratory, where he approached Peter, who was still extracting the spiders from the terrarium. As Norman observed the security footage of Richard speaking to Peter, he noticed how uncharacteristically intense Richard looked. Peter seemed thrown off by it as well but continued to remove the spiders. Shortly thereafter, they were seen leaving the laboratory and exiting past the security check gate to the vehicle that was parked outside the front exit, driven by Mary. Norman stopped the video footage and sat back in his chair, looking up at the ceiling in his office.

What did you say to Dr. Connors? wondered Norman.

He got up from his desk and walked out of his office, deciding he would have Dr. Connors record the details of their interaction in an incident report to find out what was said. He was curious if Dr. Connors noticed any odd behavior from Richard during their interaction on Friday. He walked down the corridor, through the foyer, and up the stairs to the laboratory. He was still going over the footage in his mind as he scanned his eyes and tapped his ID badge to the panel on the wall. The laboratory door sounded. Oddly, it seemed like there was no one present other than the laboratory technicians who resided in the communal part of the laboratory. He walked through the laboratory to Dr. Connors' office and knocked on the door. There was no answer. He opened the door to find the light was off. He turned and walked

through the main lab, making his way back to where the laboratory technicians' workstations were.

"Good morning, Mr. Osborn," said the lab technician as Norman approached.

"Good morning. Have you seen Dr. Connors this morning? Do you know if he's in today?" asked Norman.

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm not sure. I haven't seen him this morning," said the lab technician.

"Thank you," said Norman, as he turned and made his way out of the laboratory.

He walked quickly, wondering if Dr. Connors had been in on it the whole time. He made his way down the stairs and to the security desk.

"Good morning, Mr. Osborn," said Mr. Berkley, as Norman knocked on the door of the security booth.

"Good morning. Do me a favor—tell me if Dr. Connors is in the building today," said Norman.

"Of course, Mr. Osborn," said Mr. Berkley, as he brought up Dr. Connors' security clearance information.

Norman felt a trickle of sweat roll down his lower back as he stood there anxiously.

"I don't see any scans today, Mr. Osborn. The last scan I have in the system of his is on Friday evening leaving the building," said Mr. Berkley.

"Thank you."

Norman turned and began walking briskly back to his office, trying to piece everything together.

He may have seen the paper this morning and been devastated by the news, he thought, hoping for the best possible scenario.

Norman didn't want to call the Colonel again unless it was absolutely necessary. He made his way down the corridor, past his secretary's desk. He walked up to the retinal scan on the wall and looked through it as he tapped the panel with his ID badge. The door to his office sounded as it opened. Before entering, he stopped and glanced over at his secretary.

"Call Dr. Connors' home number and see if you can get a hold of him. Put him through to me when you do," said Norman, as he went into his office.

Several minutes later, his phone rang. He picked it up, only to be informed that Dr. Connors could not be reached at his home residence. He hung up the phone, contemplating what this meant as he sat there. He

turned his computer back on and brought up the security footage from Friday. He wanted to see Dr. Connors' demeanor after Richard Parker left the laboratory. He sped the footage up to the point where Dr. Parker leaves the laboratory with his son. Approximately ten minutes later, Dr. Connors was seen exiting his office and walking through the laboratory. He was recorded taking some things from the cupboard and putting them in his pocket. He was then seen going over to the refrigerated unit and was spotted removing a vial of the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum. He then proceeded to collect some lab equipment before going back to his office and shutting the door.

What the hell are you up to, Connors? said Norman, as he sped up the footage.

Dr. Connors was spotted exiting his office approximately twenty minutes later. He put the laboratory equipment back and returned the vial to the refrigerated unit. Norman couldn't tell if the vial was empty in the video footage. Dr. Connors was then observed hastily exiting the laboratory. Norman pulled the security screening footage and watched him go through the security scan at the check gate. His belongings were thoroughly searched, just as Mr. Berkley reported, before exiting the building to the parking garage.

What the hell did you do in that office? wondered Norman, as he decided he would have to check the contents of the vial that Dr. Connors put back in the refrigerated unit.

He made his way back up to the laboratory and went into Dr. Connors' office. He looked around to see if he could find anything, such as the packaging of the needle he took from the cabinet, but found nothing in his office. He attempted to check his desk, but the drawers were locked.

Making his way back into the laboratory, he inspected the temperature-controlled unit that stored the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum. He peered in, seeing the empty vial, and took a step back, realizing the situation was much worse than he initially thought. He ran back to his office, telling his secretary to get him Colonel Fury on the line. He approached the retinal verification on the wall, scanned his eyes, tapped his ID badge to the panel, and entered his office, where he waited for the call to come through.

What the hell is going on? he thought, tempted to pour himself a drink, but decided he'd better not.

A few minutes passed as he sat there rewatching the footage of Dr. Connors taking the package out of the cupboard, the serum from the refrigerated unit, and equipment off the desk.

What did you do with that serum, Connors? he thought, as the phone rang, startling him.

"Mr. Osborn, Colonel Fury is on line one," said his secretary.

“Thank you,” said Norman, wondering if the Colonel had seen the headline in the Daily Bugle newspaper this morning as he pressed the button.

“Good morning, Colonel Fury,” said Norman.

“Good morning, Mr. Osborn. I imagine you’re calling in regard to the newspaper this morning,” said the Colonel.

“It’s one of the reasons I’m calling, Colonel. I’m not sure who leaked these allegations to the media,” said Norman.

“We leaked the allegations to the media,” said the Colonel, dismissively.

Norman sat there, shocked by the Colonel’s admission.

“Why would you leak that to the media without a proper investigation?” asked Norman, as he stood up from his chair.

“We needed to get ahead of this before it came out that they breached Oscorp’s security with confidential research. In an attempt to do what, exactly? We don’t know, and now that they’re dead, we’ll never know. I needed to put that question to rest, before someone else asked it,” said Colonel Fury, coldly.

Norman couldn’t believe what he was hearing as he stood there trying to rationalize the Colonel’s decision.

“So that’s it? We just say they were traitors and close the book?” asked Norman, frustrated by the Colonel’s response.

“That’s right. As far as I’m concerned, they committed an act of treason by breaching Oscorp’s security. They signed a non-disclosure agreement, and they breached that contract,” said the Colonel, directly.

“I’m afraid I have some more bad news, Colonel,” said Norman, somewhat smugly.

“What is it now?” asked Colonel Fury, who was becoming rather irritated due to Norman’s questioning.

“Richard Parker’s partner, Dr. Curt Connors, didn’t show up to the lab today. I thought that maybe it was due to the surprise headline we had in the newspaper this morning, so I had my secretary try to contact him, to no avail. As a precautionary measure, I ran the video footage and discovered something that I believe was missed by your Intelligence Department,” said Norman.

“My team assessed that Dr. Parker’s motive for going to Dr. Connors’ office was to distract him while the boy was extracting the spiders from the terrarium,” said Colonel Fury.

“I thought that as well when I first watched the video. However, I

only watched the footage taken at the security desk of Dr. Connors leaving Oscorp and being thoroughly searched by security. After rewatching the video footage this morning, it came to my attention that an extremely important detail was overlooked. When Dr. Parker left the laboratory on Friday, Dr. Connors came out of his office approximately ten minutes later and collected a number of the items and equipment from the lab before going back to his office, where he remained for the next twenty minutes or so," said Norman.

"You have my attention, Mr. Osborn. What did he collect and bring back to his office?" asked the Colonel, impatiently.

"A vial of the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum. I just went to the laboratory and confirmed it. There was an empty vial in the temperature controlled unit," said Norman.

"Jesus Christ. Do you think he managed to smuggle the serum past the security screening?" asked the Colonel.

"I can't say for certain. He was thoroughly searched upon exiting the facility. The footage shows him gathering what appeared to be a needle and syringe from the cabinet, some lab equipment, and a vial of the serum from the refrigerated unit. I couldn't locate the needle that he took when I searched his office. Although I didn't spend much time looking, his desk drawers were locked," said Norman.

"Why would he take a needle and syringe from the cabinet or equipment from the lab to his office if his objective was to smuggle the serum out of Oscorp?" questioned the Colonel.

"Maybe to make it look like he was preparing to administer the serum to a rodent test subject. He would have known there were cameras monitoring the laboratory. He may have transferred the serum out of the vial and put it into a container that was undetectable to the security scanners," speculated Norman.

"He went back into his office with a vial of the serum, some equipment, and a needle and syringe, knowing we'd see the footage. It doesn't seem like he was concerned about the cameras. Why go through the trouble of transferring the serum into another vial or container only to leave the empty vial for us to find in the refrigerated unit?" asked the Colonel, suspiciously.

"What are you implying, Colonel?" asked Norman.

"You know the man. Do you think he would administer the serum to himself? Would he do something that reckless?" asked the Colonel.

"I don't know what to think at this point. None of this makes any sense," said Norman, truthfully.

“Alright, I’ll pull Connors’ file and dispatch a team to search his home and detain him if he’s there. We need to know what the hell is going on here. It seems likely that he was in on whatever Richard and Mary Parker were scheming,” said the Colonel.

“If it’s all the same to you Colonel, I’d like to know as soon as he’s apprehended. I want to be there when he’s being questioned and hear why they did it,” said Norman, feeling betrayed.

“Very well. I’ll be in touch with you once he’s been apprehended,” said the Colonel.

Norman hung up the phone and went to his liquor cabinet and poured himself a drink. Frustrated with the situation, he began to pace his office. He tried to calm down, wondering if he should still send the obituary letter out that he prepared for the staff at Oscorp. He had planned to do so before seeing the accusations in the newspaper headline this morning.

How do you send out an obituary letter for two people who have been accused of committing treason? he thought, knowing it was reasonable to assume that those he employed were already gossiping about the story in the newspaper this morning.

He sat back down at his desk and began to modify the obituary he had written on the weekend. He decided to change it to a eulogy that could be given at their funeral to honor the life of Richard and Mary Parker. Angry as he was, he was aware it was the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency that leaked the story to the Daily Bugle claiming that Richard and Mary Parker committed treason. The Agency unjustly gave the Bugle that story without a proper investigation into the matter. Norman couldn’t help but think that there was something he was missing that led Richard to do this. A few hours had passed as he sat there writing some of his memories of the quirky couple that came to Oscorp over a decade ago. Suddenly the phone rang, startling him. He picked it up, anxious to hear who was on the line.

“Mr. Osborn, you have a call from Colonel Fury on line one,” said his secretary.

They must have apprehended him, thought Norman, as he pressed the button to connect the call.

“Colonel Fury, has Dr. Connors been brought in for questioning?” asked Norman, hoping to receive some good news.

“Norman, we have a situation. I’m sending a chopper to pick you up; it’ll be there shortly,” said the Colonel, ending the call abruptly.

Norman sat there confused, still holding the phone to his ear as the dial tone could be heard. He hung up the phone and got up from his chair. He walked back and forth trying to comprehend why the Colonel would be

sending a chopper without the slightest explanation. He wondered what could be so urgent for the Colonel to end the call that abruptly. He prepared his things and informed his team to notify him when the helicopter had landed on the launchpad. His mind raced, thinking they must have uncovered something Parker and Connors were planning.

He paced his office until he was notified to come up to the launchpad: the chopper had arrived. He was helped getting into the helicopter and buckled in his seat as they signaled to the pilot that he was cleared for takeoff. Norman wasn't particularly fond of helicopters, but it was faster than the ferry to Ravencroft. Everything felt surreal, like this was a dream that he was going to wake up from at any moment. He watched the water below sparkle as the sun reflected off of it, thankful that it wasn't raining during the flight there. They touched down onto the Ravencroft launchpad; Agent Dugan had been waiting for him to arrive. The agent helped him out of the helicopter and took him through security. Once he was cleared by security, the agent escorted him through Ravencroft to see the Colonel.

"I don't suppose you know what's going on?" asked Norman as they walked down the hallway.

"I'll leave it to the Colonel to explain, Mr. Osborn," said Agent Dugan.

Norman felt anxious as Agent Dugan scanned them into a small office where the Colonel was waiting. Norman entered the room behind Agent Dugan and noticed that there was a glass panel on the wall that they could see through. On the other side there was a man that was clearly not Dr. Conners being questioned by an Interrogation Officer. Confused, Norman looked over at the Colonel, who stood up and greeted him with a handshake.

"Norman, have a seat," said the Colonel, as he walked back around the table and sat down in his chair.

"What's going on? Did you locate Dr. Connors?" asked Norman, noticing his mouth was extremely parched as he sat down.

"We located Dr. Connors. Unfortunately, my team wasn't able to detain him," said Colonel Fury.

"They weren't able to detain him? Why not?" asked Norman, confused by the Colonel's reluctance to explain the situation.

"I'd like you to listen to the agent in the interrogation room being questioned," said the Colonel, as he stood up and pressed a button on the wall.

The Interrogation Officer in the room behind the glass that was questioning the agent stood up and excused himself, telling the agent he'd return in a moment. Shortly after, the Interrogation Officer opened the door

to the room Norman and the Colonel were in.

"Sir?" said the Interrogation Officer, waiting for instruction.

"Start again, from the beginning," ordered the Colonel.

"Yes, sir," said the Interrogation Officer, as he shut the door and went back into the interrogation room.

"I'm sorry, Colonel, I'm a little confused as to what's going on," said Norman.

"Just listen, Mr. Osborn," said the Colonel, impatiently.

Norman sat back and did as he was told, remaining quiet as the Interrogation Officer began to cross-examine the agent.

"Let's start again from the top, Agent Foster. The team arrived at Dr. Connors' townhouse; take it from there," said the Interrogation Officer.

"Yes, sir. We were instructed to apprehend the suspect if he was present in the home. We breached the entrance and entered the premises—standard protocol as usual. I had the rear; Agent Barrie and Agent Cleary were at my two and ten as we swept through the house. We heard a noise coming from the hallway that sounded like something falling over in one of the rooms. We headed down the hallway toward the bedroom. Agent Barrie asked us to give him a two," said Agent Foster, as the Interrogation Officer interrupted him to clarify.

"The term 'give me a two' means what exactly?" asked the Interrogation Officer.

"Asking for backup during room breaching, sir," said Agent Foster.

"Thank you. Please continue," said the Interrogation Officer.

"We were positioned outside the door as Agent Barrie breached the room with his weapon drawn, but before we could react, some kind of humanoid creature was on top of him, attacking him. It appeared somewhat reptilian in nature, from what I recall. I didn't fire immediately because it was directly on top of Agent Barrie, and he was trying to fight the creature off. It happened so fast… it took a moment to process. I was looking to fire a single kill shot, aiming for the creature's head, but it was moving around so much I couldn't, or I'd risk hitting Agent Barrie. Agent Cleary managed to get a few rounds off, but I wasn't able to see exactly where he hit it," said Agent Foster, as the Interrogation Officer interjected.

"How do you know he hit the creature then?" asked the Interrogation Officer.

"He definitely hit it because it visibly angered the creature, and in the blink of an eye, it was on top of Agent Cleary. I've never seen anything move

that quickly in my life. I jumped back instinctively and fired off several rounds into the creature. The next thing I remember was opening my eyes on the floor, gasping for air from having the wind knocked out of me. I heard a crash through some glass in the living room. When I finally got up, I was…" the agent paused for a moment, staring off.

"When you finally got up, you were what, Agent Foster?"

"When I finally got up, I was too scared to pursue it. I held my position and checked on Agent Barrie and Agent Cleary, who were both badly injured. I radioed for medics and backup and waited in the hallway with my weapon drawn, hoping it wouldn't return," said Agent Foster, who seemed ashamed.

"Thank you, Agent Foster. Just a few more questions before we wrap this up," said the Interrogation Officer.

"Of course, sir," said Agent Foster.

"Can you describe the creature for me?" asked the Interrogation Officer.

"Yes, sir. It looked like a cross between a man and lizard. Almost like some kind of hybrid creature," said Agent Foster.

"Did it's body have scales like a reptile?" asked the Interrogation Officer.

"It appeared to have greenish, scaly skin, but as strange as it sounds, it was wearing clothing. I couldn't get the best look at it, because it moved so quickly, but it definitely wasn't human," said the agent, who still seemed shaken from the experience.

"Thank you, Agent Foster. I may need to ask you some more questions in the next few days. Until then, get some rest," said the Interrogation Officer, as he escorted the man out of the interrogation room.

The Colonel turned in his seat to see Norman looking completely aghast.

"I think we have the answer to our question regarding the video footage you reviewed this morning, Mr. Osborn. It would appear that Dr. Connors administered the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum to himself," said Colonel Fury.

Norman sat there a moment trying to absorb everything that he had just heard.

"Maybe Richard and Mary Parker had some insight into what Dr. Connors intended to do, causing Richard to take the spiders," speculated Norman, as he tried to make sense of the situation.

“Perhaps, but that’s the least of our worries at the moment,” said the Colonel, bluntly.

“What makes you say that?” asked Norman.

“We have a six foot bipedal lizard man running loose in the city at the moment, Mr. Osborn,” said Colonel Fury, as he stood up and began to pace the room while Norman shifted in his seat uncomfortably.

“Was your team able to track it? I mean, Dr. Connors, after he escaped by jumping through the window?” asked Norman, assuming that’s what Agent Foster heard when he said there was a crash through some glass in the living room.

“We have a Tactical Unit that has tracked the creature to the subway tunnels. We’re trying to contain the situation before it’s witnessed publicly,” said Colonel Fury.

“How do you want me to handle this? What do you want me to say regarding Richard and Mary Parker when I get back to Oscorp? I have to address the matter with Dr. Connors as well, or it will seem odd that he’s suddenly absent,” said Norman.

“For now, I don’t want you to say anything. I have my team working on it. We’ll likely link him to the story that was printed on Richard and Mary Parker,” said the Colonel.

“I’d like to attend the funeral, despite the allegations,” said Norman.

“I don’t think that would be the best course of action, Mr. Osborn,” said the Colonel.

Norman was feeling the weight of the Colonel’s decision and wanted to argue his point but instead looked away and nodded his head in agreement.

“I have some other unfortunate news. The oceanography team has progressively gotten worse since arriving here at Ravencroft. It was decided by our medical staff that the safest course of action would be to administer anesthetic drugs and put the team into a controlled, medically induced coma while they conduct some more tests,” said Colonel Fury.

Norman looked at the Colonel in disbelief. He sat there a moment, searching for words to let his frustration out, but refrained.

“What’s going on with them?” asked Norman.

“They’ve been experiencing severe pain and discomfort. It became so intense that morphine wasn’t sufficient,” said the Colonel.

“What about Ben Grimm’s fiancée? Has she been here to visit him since the accident?” asked Norman, who had forgotten all about his

discussion with her since the incident with Richard and Mary Parker.

"We intended to schedule her to visit with him, but he was heavily sedated and wasn't in any condition to communicate with her. Fortunately, Reed Richards hadn't begun to feel the effects of the accident as severely at the time and was able to assure her over the phone that they'd be alright. I had Dr. Richards contact her the same day we arranged the call with Dr. Parker. Our medical staff has been in communication with her since to give her updates on his condition, but as I said, it's only gotten worse," said the Colonel.

He walked over to the door, scanned his security badge, and looked through the retinal scanner as the door buzzed and unlocked.

"Come with me," said Colonel Fury, as they made their way down the hallway toward the infirmary.

Norman desperately wanted to ask for a glass of water but followed the Colonel through the security checkpoints and into the infirmary where the oceanography team resided.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Streiten. Would you mind accompanying us?" asked the Colonel, as they walked into the patient's room.

Norman suddenly stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Ben Grimm lying there unconscious with an oxygen tube in his mouth. It took him a moment to process what he was looking at as he turned to the doctor for an explanation.

"What in God's name is happening to him?" asked Norman, as Ben was unrecognizable.

"He's stable now, but he had dangerously low blood oxygen levels and started to display symptoms of hypoxia," said the doctor**.**

"What's hypoxia?" asked Norman.

"Hypoxia is a condition in which the body's tissues don't have enough oxygen. Normally, we breathe at a regular rate. When we take in air, it goes into alveoli, tiny sacs in the lungs. The alveoli transfer oxygen into blood, flowing through very small capillary blood vessels. Once the blood reaches capillaries in the tissues, it releases oxygen that goes into the cells of the tissues. The cells have structures called mitochondria. These use the oxygen to make energy for the cell. Hypoxia can result when any of these processes goes wrong," explained Dr. Streiten.

"I assigned Dr. Streiten to care for the oceanography team. He works in our trauma wing," said Colonel Fury.

"Why does his skin look like that?" asked Norman, staring at Ben, horrified and confused.

“Ben Grimm was the first of the oceanography team to display signs of illness. At first the medical staff diagnosed him with something called stiff-skin syndrome. It started as a small patch, and it soon spread all over, progressively getting worse each day. They’re trying to slow it down as much as they can until we can find a way to treat it, but we now believe it to be much more severe than that. He’s developed an extremely rare skin condition that is turning him to stone,” said Dr. Streiten.

“Stone? I don’t understand. How is that possible? What about the others?” asked Norman, feeling lightheaded, as though he may pass out.

“The others were complaining of symptoms similar to how Ben was initially feeling. How it was explained to me by the medical staff was that Ben experienced feeling stiff, as though his body was becoming hard all over, until the pain he was feeling became unbearable. Jonathan Stoarm reported that he felt like his entire body was on fire. I was skeptical of the notion initially… that is, until I witnessed the impossible with my own eyes and watched the man spontaneously combust in his bed. Seeing that he was on fire and being burnt alive, we did our best to suppress the flames, but to our astonishment, they could not be extinguished. He was hysterical with pain and finally succumbed to it. Once he lost consciousness, we were able to put out the flames. We assumed he was dead, as his skin was charred and black, his hair was burnt away, and he was unrecognizable. As severe as his burns were, we soon realized that he was still alive and began to treat his wounds. I can’t say I have witnessed many miracles in my lifetime, but on that eve, I witnessed something that goes against all medical theory. The nurses treating his wounds called me into the room to observe something unusual. There was new skin that was undamaged underneath the old burnt skin that peeled off like dry, crispy flakes. What I witnessed could not be explained medically. The following morning, it was as though the incident never happened,” said Dr. Streiten, as Norman tried to comprehend what he was hearing.

“Wait a minute—what are you saying? He completely recovered?” asked Norman, in disbelief.

“What I’m saying is I witnessed a medical miracle that cannot be explained. The following morning, his skin was no longer burnt, his hair had grown back, and he had regained consciousness. Unfortunately for the patient, what remained was the fear and excruciating memory of being on fire. Due to the unpredictable nature of the condition, we decided for the safety of the patient and the medical staff that he be put into a medically induced coma. I am not versed in the subject; therefore, I reached out to a colleague who suggested that ketosis, possibly caused by alcoholism or low-carb dieting, may have produced acetone, which is highly flammable and could have potentially led to his spontaneous combustion. He could not explain, nor did he wish to entertain the discussion further, when I told him of the patient’s recovery the following day. I began to research the subject

myself; there's been a study published that proposed a pseudoscientific new subatomic particle, which they called Pyrotron. I'm still trying to understand the principles of the theory. However, nothing can explain the miracle I witnessed with my own eyes. I watched the patient burn alive and recover in less than a day," said Dr. Streiten.

Norman stood there listening to the doctor's claims but couldn't make sense of what he was hearing. It simply wasn't possible.

"What about Dr. Richards and his wife, Susan?" asked Norman, curiously.

"We've been conducting tests on their DNA which are still inconclusive due to the fact that we've never seen anything like this before. In Dr. Richards' case, he described feeling as though his body was melting. We took blood samples from him, and there appears to be damage to the DNA structure, separating DNA strands for replication or transcription. We found there was unraveling DNA, separating the two strands of the DNA double helix, which is essential for processes like DNA replication, transcription, and repair. The main enzyme that unwinds DNA is called DNA helicase. The helicase unzips DNA in order to kickstart DNA replication and provides energy for making RNA which touches nearly everything in a cell. We're seeing unraveling DNA repair in Dr. Richards' blood samples and we're trying to understand the molecular mechanisms and consequences of the repair defect. If the structure of the DNA is damaged and unable to properly repair, the result is cell death and tissue degeneration. To avoid this and in order for the genome to be reproduced, these damages must be corrected efficiently by DNA repair mechanisms," said Dr. Streiten.

"What about his wife, Susan?" asked Norman, hoping for a simpler explanation.

"I'm afraid her condition is equally perplexing. The patient described having extreme headaches—worse than any migraine that she's ever had. When we observed her blood samples, she was missing chunks of DNA, which is usually linked to schizophrenia and autism. If significant amounts of DNA are missing, chromosomal abnormalities can arise, resulting in developmental diseases or syndromes. DNA loss may affect the stability and integrity of the genome, resulting in greater genetic instability or increased susceptibility to other genetic disorders. I requested her hospital records and went through her file; the blood samples taken from her physical examination prior to the incident were completely normal," said Dr. Streiten.

"How do you plan on treating them? I assume you can't keep them in a medically induced coma forever," said Norman, directly.

"They each display different symptoms, making it extremely complicated to diagnose and determine the cause of their condition," said Dr.

Streiten.

"I assure you, Mr. Osborn, we're giving them the best medical treatment that can be provided. I hate to cut this short, but we have an important matter to attend to. Thank you for your time, Dr. Streiten," said Colonel Fury, as he and Norman made their way to the exit.

Norman didn't know what to make of it all. He was at a complete loss for words as they made their way down the corridor.

"Mr. Osborn, I'll have Agent Dugan see you out. I'll keep you up to date regarding the oceanography team. Our main point of focus right now is locating Dr. Connors and containing the situation. In the meantime, I don't want you to say anything regarding Dr. Connors to your people until we put something out to the media," said Colonel Fury.

"How do you want me to address my staff regarding the death of Richard and Mary Parker?" asked Norman.

"Send out a company email. Announce that there was a tragic accident involving the Parkers that took place, nothing more," said the Colonel.

Norman suddenly felt exhausted from it all. He nodded his head in agreement and shook the Colonel's hand. Agent Dugan escorted Norman through Ravencroft, exiting the facility to the helicopter launchpad. He shook the agent's hand and boarded the helicopter, anxious to get back to Oscorp and as far away from Ravencroft as possible.

Eddie Brock

Eddie woke, startled by the sound of the phone ringing. He jumped up to grab it, knocking over an empty bottle of prescription medication as he picked up the phone. He was hoping it was Terri Lee with another lead. The killer, now known as Carnage, hadn't resurfaced since Eddie's story printed in the Daily Bugle. The Carnage story sold so well that he was asked to write a follow-up article on the four other murders that were linked to the case which had taken place earlier in the year. The scoop helped pay his bills and get his meds, but Eddie was still desperate for money.

"Hello?" said Eddie, trying not to sound as out of it as he felt.

"Eddie, it's Robbie Robertson. How've you been?" asked Robbie, who after seeing Brock in the state he was in had become concerned for his well-being.

"Oh hey, Robbie. I've been good, man. How are you doing?" asked Brock, trying to downplay the severity of his condition.

"I'm good, thanks. Sorry for calling you out of the blue like this, but I just caught wind of an interesting story, to say the least. It may seem like a bit of a stretch, so if you don't want it, I'd totally understand. You just came to mind," said Robbie, worried it would come across as a handout.

"No, I'm free. What do you got?" asked Eddie, trying not to sound as desperate as he was.

"I know how this might sound, but I just got a call from the office saying they have a situation involving a few witnesses claiming they saw some sort of lizard man down at the subway station. I can send someone down there to get a statement, but I figured I'd reach out and see if you were interested in covering it before I give it to one of my guys," said Robbie, who was just trying to look out for Eddie.

"I appreciate the call, Robbie! I'll definitely take it; I'll take whatever you've got for me! I'll head down there right away and stop by the Bugle afterwards to submit the story," said Eddie, gratefully, as he hung up the phone.

He didn't have the luxury of being picky with his work these days. Rent was almost due, and he had just caught up with his bill payments. Eddie grabbed the bottle of medication off of his end table and put it in his jacket pocket, along with his keys, tape recorder, and an extra pack of batteries he put in his briefcase, just in case. He stood there waiting for the elevator, wondering if Robbie really believed Mr. Jameson would buy some over the top lizard man story. He walked through the parking garage to his 1974

Chevrolet Monte Carlo, opened the door, and got in. He was chilled to the bone; the damp weather had been taking its toll on him lately. He sat there shivering before pulling out of his parking spot and driving up the garage ramp.

He silently prayed that this would be a scoop that sells so he could afford to get his prescription refilled and pay his rent. He was hopeful. Nowadays, it felt like there was less investigative journalism and more stories that were based on speculation. He thought about the recent headline regarding the geneticist and his wife from Oscorp that were killed in a car wreck last week and accused of treason. The story lacked any hard evidence regarding the accusations, just a catchy headline with a tragic ending. Eddie had an eye for stories that weren't written by journalists. He wondered who had written that one, thinking maybe he could get something out of Robbie later, seeing as he's the one who edited it for print.

He got to the subway station and found the police had blocked off the area where the incident had taken place. He parked his car and got out, taking his briefcase containing his laptop with him as he noticed one of the beat cops taking a statement from a woman who appeared to be in her late fifties. He watched patiently, waiting for the officer to finish with her. When the officer finished recording her statement, she made her way from the station towards the street as Eddie approached her.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I'm a journalist from the Daily Bugle newspaper. I was wondering if you could tell me what happened here today," asked Eddie, as kindly as he could manage.

The woman hesitated a moment, then continued walking, proceeding to make her way across the street. She contemplated if she should just tell him to go away. She was exhausted and had been treated by the paramedics for shock. She appeared somewhat confused, unsure if she should stay or go. Brock followed her across the street, continuing to speak calmly as he pressed the record button to document the conversation on the tape recorder he had in his jacket pocket.

"We got a call down at the Daily Bugle that there was a disturbance in the subway station involving some sort of strange creature," said Eddie, unsure how his words may come off to the woman.

She stopped, somewhat hesitant, standing there as the rain lightly fell, recalling the strange incident.

"I know how it sounds, but I know what I saw," she said, looking at Eddie, deciding if she should recount the traumatic event for the journalist.

"I don't doubt that at all, ma'am. I wouldn't have come down here to speak to you if I did. Could you tell me what you saw, please, ma'am?" asked Eddie, aware of what was at stake if she walked away without giving him a

statement.

"It looked somewhat human, but it wasn't. It had those eyes…" said the woman, as she looked through Eddie, recalling the creature in her memory.

She shuddered and looked away, as if she were afraid it might return.

"Can I buy you a cup of coffee, ma'am? We can get out of this damp weather and talk for a moment," asked Eddie, desperately.

Again she hesitated, as though the thought of it wasn't something she wanted to recall. Nevertheless, she agreed and followed Eddie to the coffee shop across the street. They entered the small shop; Eddie went to the counter and placed an order for them while the woman went and found a seat. He paid for the order and walked over to the table she was sitting at with two cups of coffee, some cream, sugar, and a couple of stir sticks.

"Let's start where you left off. What about those eyes?" asked Eddie, curiously.

The woman opened her purse and took out a package of cigarettes. She took one out from the pack and lit it as she recounted the incident in the subway station.

"They were glowing," said the woman as she exhaled the cigarette smoke.

"Glowing? You mean like a raccoon's eyes in the dark?" asked Eddie.

"I mean like a demon's eyes. They were red," said the woman.

Her hands were still shaking as she took a drag off the cigarette. Eddie studied her for a moment.

"The cops didn't believe me either," she said, feeling the urge to get up and leave.

"I believe you completely, I promise you. I wouldn't have asked you to come here if I didn't, ma'am," said Eddie, worried he was going to lose the story before he got anything worthwhile out of her.

"Can you take it from the top for me, ma'am? Where'd you first see it?" asked Eddie.

"I was on the platform waiting for the train. I noticed two small, red glowing lights just around the bend that were low to the tracks. I had no idea what it was at first, but as I watched it, I realized it was some kind of creature hunched over eating something. I noticed what looked like a long string moving around each time it brought its hand up to its mouth. After observing it for a moment, I realized it wasn't a string—it was the tail of a rat. There were other people on the platform waiting for the train as well. I suppose I

wasn't the only one who noticed the thing because there was a woman that screamed and startled the creature. It stood up out of the shadows on two legs, giving me a better view. It had red slaver running down its chin from the blood of the rat. The strangest part, and I know this doesn't make sense, was that it was wearing clothing. That being said, I can confidently say without a doubt, it definitely wasn't human. The best I can describe it is it looked like a lizard man," said the woman, feeling somewhat embarrassed saying it out loud.

"Can I get your full name for the record, ma'am?" asked Eddie.

"I don't want my name in the paper," she said, as she put her cigarette out and lit another one.

She was still visibly shaken, unsure how else she could describe what she had seen.

"I understand. I respect your privacy, ma'am. You don't have to give me your name; I'll write that the witness preferred to remain anonymous. What happened after the woman screamed," asked Eddie, watching the woman intently.

"The sudden scream spooked the thing. It stood up and made what sounded to me like a hissing sound before it darted off. I've never seen anything move that quick. It moved unnaturally fast," said the woman.

Her eyes were intense, as though she was reliving the moment as she told it.

"You say it made a hissing sound? Like a cat?" asked Eddie, making sure he understood her right.

"That's right, like a cat. It doesn't seem like the sound something like that would make, but that's the sound it made, alright? Look, mister, I've told you everything I saw. I really have to get going," said that woman, exhausted from the incident and the endless questioning that followed it.

"Of course, ma'am. Thank you for your time; I'm truly grateful. Here's my card—it has my number on there if you remember anything else. You can call me anytime, day or night," said Eddie, as he handed the woman his card.

She nodded and put the card in her purse. She got up from the table and left the coffee shop as Eddie checked the recording quality. He sat there listening to the woman's story, wondering if Mr. Jameson would really buy a story like this. Although, if Robbie thought he would, that was reason enough for him to work the story. He picked up on the small details while listening back to the recording that he didn't catch the first time. He hadn't noticed how shaken she sounded while describing the creature's eyes. Eddie was a good judge of character, and she didn't strike him as the type of woman to make something up, especially seeing that she didn't ask to be compensated

for the story. It just seemed like she wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

Eddie finished listening to the tape recording and hit rewind. He pulled his laptop out from his briefcase and typed the woman's story up. He sat there reading his work over carefully, making sure that nothing was missed. When he finished looking over the story, he got up from the table and walked out of the coffee shop and back across the street to where he parked his car. He put his briefcase in the car, locked the door, and walked back across the street to the payphone. He was shivering and felt a bit lightheaded as he entered the phone booth. He put a quarter in and dialed Terri Lee's number at the station, hoping he could get the scoop on what the cops had on this lizard man in comparison to the witness's story. He figured it would be worth more if he could validate it before bringing it to Robbie for editing. He hated the thought of bringing anything as far-fetched as this to Mr. Jameson without substantiating it, out of fear of being blacklisted again.

"Detective Bureau, Terri Lee speaking."

"Terri, it's Eddie. I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time."

"No, I was just filling out some paperwork. What's up? Is everything okay?" asked Terri.

"I have a favor to ask," said Eddie, feeling like that's all he asked for these days.

"A favor? I haven't heard from you in a while; how have you been?" asked Terri, concerned the reason she hadn't heard from him was because he wasn't doing well.

"I've been doing better, thanks to you tipping me off on the Carnage story. I owe you one, Terri," said Eddie, trying not to get choked up.

"I'm glad I was able to help. So, what's up?" she asked.

"I wanted to ask if you heard anything about this lizard man story in the subway station this afternoon?" asked Brock, aware of how crazy that statement sounded.

"I heard about it. Don't tell me you're trying to get the jump on this?" asked Terri.

She was worried that Brock got lucky with the Carnage scoop and now thought of bringing Mr. Jameson this crazy tabloid story out of desperation.

"I know how it looks, Terri. Believe me, I normally wouldn't have gone near this story, but the chief editor for the Daily Bugle is the one who suggested I cover it," said Eddie.

"Why would he suggest a story like this?" she asked, worried Eddie

was being set up to fail.

"I was desperate to get him to edit the Carnage scoop for me before I went to Mr. Jameson, and I confided in him. I think he's just trying to help me out," said Eddie, hoping he didn't say too much.

Terri knew Brock well and realized there was something going on with him that he didn't want to reveal to her.

"You confided in him? What's going on with you, Eddie? You can talk to me about anything; you know that, right?" asked Terri, frustrated to be kept at a distance.

"I know that, Terri. You're the only person I've been able to count on," said Brock.

She had watched Eddie's health and appearance steadily decline and was genuinely concerned for him.

"So, what do you want to know?" sighed Terri.

"Have you heard anything at the station about this alleged lizard man that I can use before taking the story to Jameson?" asked Eddie.

"I don't have any details, but as crazy as the story sounds, I heard there were three separate witnesses that gave corroborating statements. I can't say I believe it, but I can confirm that they each described seeing something similar on the subway tracks. The whole department had a laugh at the fact that we had to put out an APB on a bipedal lizard man," said Terri, keeping her voice down so no one in the department heard her.

"Three witnesses? That's great news. I got a statement from one, but the fact that there were two other witnesses adds weight to the scoop. Thanks, Terri. I appreciate you looking out; I owe you one. Well, maybe more than one," said Brock, as he hung up the phone.

He reached in his pocket, pulled out another quarter, and called Robbie to let him know he got the scoop and was on his way to the Bugle. He ran across the street to his car as the rain began to come down hard. He shook off his coat and started the car, putting his defogger on as he pulled his laptop out of his briefcase. He wrote that there were three witnesses that corroborated the story of the lizard seen in the subway tunnels this afternoon before pulling out of the parking spot and heading to the Daily Bugle. The rain was getting to him; even though the weather had gotten warmer, the dampness had him shivering. His body suddenly felt weak and jittery. He needed to eat something. The medication didn't mix well with the coffee he just drank and had his stomach turning. He put his four-way hazard lights on and pulled into the right lane as he stopped the vehicle. He opened his door, leaned over, and vomited onto the road, dry heaving several times before sitting up and composing himself. He felt a rush of emotion hit him while he

sat there a moment, as the people in the cars behind him honked their horns and swerved around him angrily. He turned his four-way hazard lights off and put the car in gear as tears rolled down his face.

Why is this happening to me? he thought, frustrated and exhausted from it all as he drove off.

He pulled into the Daily Bugle's parking lot and sat in his car for a moment, trying to pull himself together before going inside.

I just need to catch a break with a story that I can follow up with to get a steady income for my medication and bills, thought Brock as he sat there watching the water droplets trickle down the windshield.

The Carnage case had gone cold since the Daily Bugle put the story out. Brock figured the serial killer was lying low, biding his time. He felt guilty hoping to profit off the story, but Robbie had informed him that they had completely sold out everywhere. Apparently, Mr. Jameson was extremely pleased. Robbie told him he would undoubtedly allow a follow up story if there was anything else Brock had for them.

He grabbed his briefcase, opened the car door, got out, and walked into the building. He greeted the security officer, showed him his press credentials, and went to the reception desk.

"Good afternoon, I have an appointment with Mr. Robertson," said Eddie, as the woman at the reception desk checked the appointment schedule.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Brock. Yes, I have you here. You can go up," said the woman.

"Thank you."

He stood there waiting for the elevator, still feeling jittery.

I can relax and grab a bite to eat after I'm done here, he thought, as the elevator door opened.

He walked in and pressed the seventeenth floor as the door closed. Eddie was relieved he didn't have to sell Mr. Jameson on the story—that was on Robbie this time. His job was to make sure he got the scoop, and that it was intriguing enough to sell newspapers. The door opened as he made his way down the hall to the editorial department, finding Robbie in his office on the phone. He stood in the doorway and knocked lightly. Robbie waved him in. He walked in and sat down in the chair across from Robbie's desk. Robbie finished speaking to the junior editor and hung up the phone while Eddie sat there waiting.

"Sorry about that, Eddie. What do you got for me?" asked Robbie, hopeful that Eddie had something that would sell.

The Bugle's only sold-out newspaper this year came from Eddie's Carnage story. It reminded Robbie and, most importantly, Mr. Jameson, that Eddie had solid instincts as an investigative journalist and could put a story together that sold newspapers.

"I think I got something legit in this lizard man scoop," said Eddie, as he pulled the floppy disk out of his briefcase.

He handed it to Robbie, so he could take a look while they talked. Eddie was anxious, wondering if Mr. Jameson already knew about this lizard man incident in the subway. Robbie inserted the floppy disk into his computer and opened the file. He sat there a moment, reading through the witnesses statement. Eddie could tell he was happy with it by his facial expressions.

"Wait a minute, how do you know that there were corroborating witnesses?" asked Robbie.

"I confirmed it. According to my source at the police department, there were three witnesses that all gave similar accounts of what they saw in the subway station," said Eddie, confidently.

"That's sensational! It's too bad you weren't able to get the other two statements. I don't see the name of the witness here," said Robbie.

"She wouldn't give me her name. I was lucky to get the scoop from her; she was reluctant. I got there just as the cops finished getting a statement from her. The other two had already given theirs and were gone," said Eddie.

"This is still a great scoop. I think you got lucky with your witness. We definitely have what we need here," said Robbie, skimming through the story Eddie had written as they sat there.

"I'm glad I was able to get the story. Hey Robbie, I just want to say thanks again for the heads up on the scoop. I appreciate it," said Eddie, grateful that Robbie kept him in mind.

"Don't mention it, Eddie. Besides, you're the one who broke the news on the Carnage story and wrote the only sold-out newspaper we've had all year. I think it's safe to say you're back in the good graces of Mr. Jameson, which will help get your stories printed," said Robbie, seeing the relief on Eddie's face.

"You think so?" asked Eddie, as he struggled to remain composed, overwhelmed with emotion.

Robbie opened the drawer in his desk and set down a pager in front of Eddie.

"Here, this will make it easier for us to get in touch with each other

going forward," said Robbie, gauging Eddie's reaction.

His eyes were fixed on the pager in front of him as he sat there a moment trying to process what Robbie just said.

"Are you giving me my old job back?" asked Eddie, as he looked up at Robbie, uncertain if he understood him correctly.

"You just keep bringing me the scoops, and I'll keep letting you know when I have something for you," said Robbie.

Eddie looked down at the floor, fighting back the tears as he sat there in front of Robbie.

"I don't have the words to thank you enough," said Eddie, still looking at the floor, knowing that if he were to look up at Robbie he would break down.

"You don't have to thank me, Eddie. I'm just glad you're looking better than the last time I saw you. Were you able to get some medication?" asked Robbie, knowing it still wasn't enough to treat Brock's condition.

"Yeah, thanks, Robbie. I've been able to manage a lot better since taking the medication they've prescribed me. I just need to get the money for the treatment," said Eddie, finally composing himself.

He grabbed the pager off Robbie's desk and put it in his pocket.

"How much is it for the treatment?" asked Robbie, curiously.

"The doctor gave me some pamphlets to read through. I don't think I'll be able to afford it, realistically. It's between eighty and a hundred thousand," said Brock.

"That much for treatment?" asked Robbie, shocked by the cost.

"I have an appointment scheduled at the clinic to go over some of the treatment options later this week, but at this stage, my options are likely limited," said Eddie, grimly.

"Keep your head up, Eddie. I know this has been a difficult time for you, but you're one of the strongest people I've ever met. If anyone can beat the odds, it's you," said Robbie, trying to lift Eddie's spirits.

"Thanks, Robbie. I'm lucky to have friends like you looking out for me," said Brock, as he stood up and shook Robbie's hand.

Robbie walked to the doorway of his office and stood there watching Eddie make his way down the hall.

"I'll give you a call and let you know how the story does in a couple of days," said Robbie, as he turned and walked back to his desk and sat down.

He started reading through the scoop and chuckled as he looked at

the headline that Eddie came up with for the story: “The Lizard Terrorizes New York City!”

Colonel Fury made his way down the hallway towards the Biochemical Genetics Laboratory. He scanned his access card against the security panel and looked through the retinal scan with his good eye as the laboratory door opened.

"I just finished reading through your analysis on the preclinical trials that were conducted using Oscorp's Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum. How's the rodent's progress coming along?" asked the Colonel.

"Interestingly, to say the least," said Dr. Stillwell.

"In the past, Oscorp had what they thought were successful trials with the serum. However, the subjects that underwent preclinical trials suffered fatalities shortly afterwards," said the Colonel.

Dr. Stillwell stood up and walked over to the quarantined containment area, picked up the cage, and set it on the table in front of him. The Colonel approached. At first glance, it appeared the rodent was scurrying around vigorously in the cage. However, upon closer inspection, he realized that it was no longer a rodent. He stood there, disturbed by what he saw.

"As you can see, the subject is still alive. However, the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum has proven to be far too aggressive. The subject has taken up the gene of the reptile; hence, its appearance. I was planning on trialing the other rodent today to see if we could achieve similar results with a smaller dose, but unfortunately, it ate the other rodent that was in the cage with it," said Dr. Stillwell, morbidly.

"Jesus Christ," said Colonel Fury, as he examined the creature.

It had patches of hair missing, and it developed green, scaly skin where the hair had fallen out. It had slightly grown in size, and its eyes appeared to have become visibly larger. Its tail had fallen off, and a new one was growing in, which looked like a lizard's tail. A more disturbing feature was that some of its teeth had fallen out, with small, sharp teeth replacing them. Frustrated by the results, Dr. Stillwell's hopes of clinically trialing the serum on inmates at Ravencroft would now undoubtedly be prolonged.

"Not to worry, Colonel—I sent one of the lab technicians to bring us some more rodents from the biomedical laboratory. The fact that the subject is still alive is a massive breakthrough. It would appear that the most significant flaw in the serum, being the death of the subject following the administration process, seems to have been corrected," said Dr. Stillwell.

"Dr. Stillwell, I can appreciate that we've taken a step in the right

direction, but producing a mutating test subject was not our objective," said Colonel Fury, frustrated by the circumstances.

"Of course, Colonel Fury. Forgive me. I'm aware of our shortcomings," said Dr. Stillwell, submissively.

"We had an unexpected event that took place recently involving Dr. Richard Parker, his wife Mary Parker, and Dr. Curt Connors," said Colonel Fury, reluctantly.

"An unexpected event?" questioned Dr. Stillwell, wondering what the Colonel was getting at.

"It came to our attention that there was a security breach at Oscorp on Friday. Dr. Parker and his wife fled Oscorp with the genetically engineered spiders and were subsequently killed in motor vehicle accident. Following the security breach, Dr. Connors self-administered the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum, injecting himself before leaving Oscorp's laboratory. It's still inconclusive if they were working together. We just became aware of the situation with Dr. Connors this morning," said the Colonel.

Dr. Stillwell could not believe what he was hearing. He could barely contain his excitement.

"What were the results following the administration?" asked Dr. Stillwell, curiously.

The thought of being able to study the effects of the serum on a human being delighted him.

"From what we know right now, the results appear to be similar to what we see in this cage. Dr. Connors appears to have mutated, becoming reptilian in nature, and has exhibited signs of aggressive behavior, putting two agents in the infirmary; the other was treated for shock. Once we've apprehended Dr. Connors, we'll require a thorough examination of his blood to study the effects of the serum. I particularly want to know if there are any signs of mitosis, and if so, what is the rate of cellular regeneration," ordered the Colonel.

It became obvious to Dr. Stillwell that the Colonel's main objective with the Human Enhancement Project was to reproduce the regeneration rate in the subject over reproducing the Super Soldier's physical capabilities.

It finally makes sense now. I couldn't understand why the Colonel would authorize me to analyze the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum if they were trying to replicate the Human Enhancement Project to create another Super Soldier. It's clearly not about making the Super Soldier anymore. It's about replicating the regenerative properties of the serum, thought Dr. Stillwell.

"Have you taken blood samples from the subject?" asked Colonel Fury.

“I took blood samples yesterday and took samples this morning,” said Dr. Stillwell, curious to see what the Colonel wanted him to do next.

“Take another sample this afternoon. I’d like two blood samples a day: once in the morning and again in the afternoon. I want you to do a comparison analysis on the blood to see if there’s been any change in the blood’s regenerative capabilities,” ordered the Colonel.

“Certainly Colonel, I’ll take that now and compare it to the blood sample taken from this morning. I’ll have the analysis ready for you tomorrow,” said Dr. Stillwell.

“Very good. I’ll leave you to it then,” said the Colonel as he made his way out of the laboratory.

Dr. Stillwell could barely contain his elation. The thought of seeing what Dr. Connors had become fascinated him. Even someone as twisted as he was couldn’t understand the logic behind Dr. Connors’ actions.

What kind of man would do such a thing after seeing the results of the experiments time and time again? It’s beyond reason, he thought, as he put a pair of thick gloves on to protect his fingers from the aggressive behavior of the rodent test subject while taking another blood sample.

The Colonel made his way back to the central office where he found Agent Dugan.

“What’s the ETA on the Tactical Unit?” asked Colonel Fury, as he picked up the file containing the transcript from the incident report taken from Agent Foster.

The Tactical Unit was a team of Special Agents. They were assigned the task of tracking the creature into the subway tunnel after the sightings were reported. The Special Investigations Bureau’s purpose was to investigate the matter and conceal information related to the incident.

“Sir, the team should be arriving on-site any minute now. I reached out to our media contact upon your request. They’re going to link Curt Connors to the Parkers’ story, alleging that they colluded together. The Special Investigations Bureau is handling the incident that took place at the subway station following the mishap with the team at Dr. Connors’ home this morning,” said Agent Dugan.

“Where are we on that?” asked the Colonel.

“The Special Investigations Bureau followed up with the New York City police department, confirming there were three witnesses that gave corroborating statements to the police. The files containing the statements were confiscated from the police department and are being transferred here, sir,” said Agent Dugan.

“Excellent. I want to be updated on the situation when the Tactical Unit completes the assignment. We need a lockdown of the area; I don’t want any more witnesses. I want to know the moment Dr. Connors, or whatever he is now, has been detained,” ordered Colonel Fury.

“Yes, sir. I’ll notify you as soon as I receive word that Dr. Connors has been apprehended from the Comms Team,” said Agent Dugan, as he exited the central office.

The Tactical Unit was given orders to detain the creature and were better prepared knowing what to expect this time around. The area was still taped off as the team entered the subway station to track the creature. The subway tunnels were dark and loud, making tracking challenging and communication difficult.

The Tactical Unit consisted of twelve highly experienced agents that were heavily armed and skilled trackers. They entered the station fully geared with body armor, automatic weapons, and helmets consisting of built-in radio communication. They were equipped with night vision goggles, and their weapons had infrared flashlights fixed to them to assist with visibility in conditions of complete darkness, providing the necessary ambient infrared light for the night vision goggles’ sensor to amplify. Their radio equipment enabled them to communicate quietly with one another. It also allowed them to stay in contact with the Comms Team that was located on the surface, working from the truck just outside the subway station. The communications equipment was used to support operations in whisper-only environments but also served well in high-noise environments. The Tactical Unit split into two parties on opposite sides of the tracks. They walked single file, six on one side, six on the other. They located the remains of what appeared to be a partially eaten rat where the witnesses had reported seeing the creature. They continued walking single file down either side of the tracks, watching for any movement. They also had to contend with the train schedule, making it more dangerous and difficult to track the creature.

Agent Dugan remained in open communication with the Comms Team while the Tactical Unit tracked the creature. They thoroughly combed the tunnel, searching for traces of the creature, when they eventually came across a sewer gate that had metal bars preventing passage. The gate’s bars were solid iron and locked, blocking the access point which was used for maintenance. They inspected the gate, seeing that the concrete on the wall where the gate was hinged had been clawed into and broken away. It appeared similar to how an animal would burrow into the ground, allowing the creature to slip through, leading down into the dark, damp sewer.

They informed the Comms Team of their findings and got authorization to track the creature into the sewer system. The Tactical Unit had to chisel some of the wall away and remove much of their gear to be

able to squeeze through the small opening left by the creature. After managing to slip through, they passed their gear through by hand. They put their gear back on while standing on the ledge before descending down a ladder that led to the sewer tunnel. They could hear the train passing above, drowning out all other sounds. They waited at the bottom of the ladder for it to pass before proceeding down the sewer tunnel. It was quiet; their footsteps splashed through the ankle-deep water, echoing off the circular brick tunnel as they slowly made their way through the sewer. The smell became noticeably more pungent the deeper they went into the sewage tunnel.

They stopped to inform the Comms Team that they had come to an intersecting passageway in the tunnel. The Comms Team instructed them to wait while they checked the sewer map to try and pinpoint their location and direct them. The team had no idea that there were subterranean rivers and abandoned subway tunnels deep beneath the city that the local people living on the surface had long since forgotten about. While the Tactical Unit waited for instructions, one of the agents heard a noise a short distance from them.

“What was that?” he said, quietly, as he stood there, trying to make out what he was hearing.

The Tactical Unit commander ordered radio silence after hearing what sounded like a cat hissing. The commander turned and looked down the tunnel going east-west. He jumped back and quickly raised his weapon, seeing the creature crouched there. It darted towards him at an unnatural speed as he fired his weapon at the creature. It collided into the commander with such force that it broke his neck on impact. Before the Tactical Unit could turn their attention to where the creature had landed, it was already on top of another agent. Its claws were so sharp that it punctured the agent’s body armor. It bit into his neck, tearing his flesh as blood gushed out from the horrific wound. The squad members tried to create distance between themselves and the creature to get a clear shot at it. However, it was difficult to locate in all the commotion. There were ten agents left standing in the small area, which made it dangerous to start shooting blindly. The screams from the agent who had part of his neck torn out echoed throughout the sewer, causing one of the squad members to panic and fire at the creature recklessly. In the chaos that ensued, the agent lost sight of the creature and unintentionally hit some of the squad members. It moved with such speed and ferocity that it snapped the agent’s leg in half as it crashed into him. One agent ran down the tunnel, desperate to create some distance between himself and the squad. He radioed the Comms Team as the frantic encounter could be heard.

“We located the creature. We need backup!” he screamed, as he turned and looked down the sewer once he was at a safe distance before raising his weapon and firing at the creature.

The Comms Team tried to get a status on what was happening, but the agent didn't have enough time to say anything else before it was on top of him. He had managed to wound the creature, but it wasn't enough to bring it down. The screams from the agent could be heard over the radio as the Comms Team informed Agent Dugan of the situation and waited for orders. The agent emptied the entire clip before realizing that the creature was no longer on top of him. He tried to sit up but couldn't, having a broken collarbone, no use of one arm, several broken ribs, and severe whiplash. Barely able to lift his head, he struggled to move his weapon back and forth, using the infrared flashlight on the weapon to try to locate where the creature had gone. He scanned the tunnel, unaware that most of the team had been fatally injured. Those that survived were critically wounded as he lay there, slowly losing consciousness.

They were situated in an intersection of the sewer tunnel which made it difficult to tell which way the creature ran. The creature had come at them so quickly that it was nearly impossible to gauge its movements. The agent fought to remain conscious as he tried to recall what had happened. When he began firing his weapon at the creature, it turned and darted down the tunnel towards him. He wasn't entirely certain but figured he must have hit it. He emptied the entire clip while in a state of hysteria, unsure how long he fought with the creature before finally realizing that he was out of ammunition. When he opened his eyes, it had already fled before he could see which way it went. As he lay there, he felt a sharp pain in his chest and arm. Realizing he had several broken ribs, and his arm had nearly been severed where the creature had grabbed it. He closed his eyes tightly in pain as he radioed the Comms Team, struggling to talk and finding it difficult to breathe.

"Send backup—the squad's down," he said, looking down at his arm, hoping he wouldn't bleed out before help arrived as he lost consciousness from the pain.

The Comms Team informed Agent Dugan of what had been relayed to them from the downed agent and requested to send a Recovery Team to go and retrieve the injured agents. Agent Dugan walked down the corridor and back to the central office, where he found Colonel Fury.

"Sir, we have a problem," said Agent Dugan.

"What is it?" asked the Colonel.

"The Tactical Unit located the creature, but they were unsuccessful in capturing it. I was informed by the Comms Team that they lost contact with the squad after an agent radioed for backup. The team has since gone radio silent. They've requested a Recovery Team to retrieve the injured agents, but it doesn't look good. It'll take some time for them to get down there and find the team. It's uncertain the extent of their injuries," said Agent Dugan.

“What the hell happened? We sent a fully armed Tactical Unit down there, and this thing took them out?” said Colonel Fury, dumbfounded.

“I’m not entirely sure, Colonel. It seems hard to believe that Dr. Connors could have changed that rapidly in such a short time,” said Agent Dugan.

“I need to know what happened down there. Give the Recovery Team as much support as they need,” said the Colonel.

“Yes, sir,” said Agent Dugan, as he took his leave and went back to his station to get in touch with the Comms Team.

Agent Dugan contacted the Recovery Team, giving them the Tactical Unit’s coordinates and the radio broadcasting frequency they were using. He reached back out to the Comms Team to inform them that the Recovery Team was on their way. Colonel Fury contacted the Department of Defense to give them an update on the situation and inform them of Dr. Connors’ unexpected, rapidly changing condition. They expressed their concerns, sanctioning the Colonel to use any and all means necessary to keep the situation contained until the creature was captured. The Colonel, being uncertain of what they were dealing with, went down to the laboratory to speak with Dr. Stillwell, hoping to get some insight into the progressive nature of the serum. He tapped his identification card to the panel and looked into the retinal scanner. The door sounded as it unlocked. Dr. Stillwell was at his desk, working on his analysis of the blood samples taken from the rodent test subject.

Surprised to see the Colonel back at the laboratory, he rose to his feet.

“Pardon the sudden intrusion, Dr. Stillwell. What information can you give me on how the Reptilian Serum reacts when mixed with a subject’s DNA?” asked the Colonel.

“Certainly, Colonel, I’d be happy to explain how the serum reacts when mixed with a subject’s DNA. Gene Therapy addresses genetic disorders by altering a person's genetic makeup, either by providing new DNA to cells or correcting existing DNA. This can involve adding a functional gene to compensate for a faulty one, silencing a problematic gene, or directly editing the DNA within a cell,” explained Dr. Stillwell, wondering what could have happened in such a short time that the Colonel would return to ask such a question, knowing he was working on the analysis for submission tomorrow.

“Have you observed an enhanced rate of regeneration in the subjects during the most recent preclinical trials that have been conducted here at Ravencroft?” asked the Colonel.

“What we’ve observed during preclinical trials thus far is that after

the serum has been administered to the subject, there is a remarkable ability of epimorphosis. Epimorphic regeneration of the limbs has been observed in the subject at a significantly high rate. My study on the serum's effect on the regeneration process of replacing or restoring damaged or missing cells, tissues, organs, and possibly even entire body parts to full function is inconclusive, as it's still being analyzed," said Dr. Stillwell.

"Will the analysis from the preclinical trials that are done on the rodent test subjects be comparable to the effects it would have on human DNA?" asked the Colonel.

"It's not something I could hypothesize, sir. The effects that the serum might have on a human subject could be similar or completely different than the rodent test subject," said Dr. Stillwell.

Dr. Stillwell wanted to suggest that clinically trialing the serum was the only way to confirm the question but wouldn't take a chance by making such a bold statement. The Colonel had been clear about the requirements for clinical testing and he knew better than to test the Colonel's patience.

I have to make a critical decision before this gets out of control, thought Colonel Fury, as time was a factor, and he had been sanctioned to use any and all means necessary to contain the situation.

"I'm authorizing a clinical trial of Oscorp's Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum to get a better understanding of what we're dealing with," said the Colonel.

Dr. Stillwell stood there, uncertain that he had heard the Colonel correctly.

What could have happened to cause the Colonel to make such a drastic, uncharacteristic decision, after giving me orders to prepare an analysis on the preclinical experiments only a few hours ago? thought Dr. Stillwell.

"I'll have the guards bring the inmate up once we've selected one," said the Colonel, hastily.

Dr. Stillwell could barely believe what he was hearing. He paused for a moment, trying to choose his words carefully.

"Colonel, forgive me, but I must be forthright with you. The chances of us getting conclusive results from one test subject is highly improbable," said Dr. Stillwell, praying his words wouldn't sway the Colonel's decision.

His thinking was that if he was direct with the Colonel from the start, perhaps he would give him more leeway to experiment. The Colonel stood there, weighing his options, as he contemplated Dr. Stillwell's admission.

"I'll have the guards bring up five inmates for clinical trials. We'll see

the effects the serum has on the test subjects. I'll decide what's next when we see the results," said Colonel Fury.

"Of course, Colonel. Pardon my ignorance—do you intend to bring the inmates up to the laboratory to have me administer the serum now, sir?" asked Dr. Stillwell, unnerved by the Colonel's lack of preparation.

"Yes. I know it's late in the day, but you won't be taking the ferry back. I'll arrange for a helicopter to take you to the mainland once you're done. The equipment you need should be in the central laboratory. I'll have Dr. Zola assist you with the preparations," said the Colonel, as he turned and walked out of the laboratory.

Dr. Stillwell stood there, fixated on the thought of finally being authorized to conduct clinical trials as his predecessors had.

The Recovery Team radioed to the surface informing the Comms Team that they had reached the sewer gate maintenance access point. They informed them that they would need them to contact the New York City Department of Environmental Protection to get the sewer gate maintenance key. They realized there was no way they would be able to get the injured agents up the ladder and through the small opening between the wall and the gate. They stripped their gear off and laboriously climbed through the opening between the iron bars and the clawed-away concrete, doing their best to chisel away what they could.

Tensions were high. The team had been briefed on what they could potentially encounter in the dark, musky sewer tunnel. Time was a factor; they were aware that the remaining agents were critically injured. On high alert, the Recovery Team of eight agents made their way down the ladder and into the tunnel cautiously. Their mission was to recover the injured agents and get them to the surface; nothing more. They were fully armed in similar fashion to the Tactical Unit but also carried with them portable folding gurneys and medical equipment. The Recovery Team were combat-trained, fully licensed field medics. They radioed their position to the Comms Team as they approached the Tactical Unit's location. The injured agents were unresponsive to the Recovery Team approaching.

"We located the squad. Eight of the agents have been fatally injured, showing no vital signs. The remaining agents appear to be in critical condition," radioed the Recovery Team Commander.

They attended to the unresponsive agents. One of them was on the verge of bleeding out as the Recovery Team worked on slowing the bleeding. They applied pressure to the wound as the injured agent cried out in agony. The Recovery Team used a tourniquet which was effective in controlling life-threatening bleeding from a limb. The main goal was to try and slow the bleeding until they could get the agent to the surface to receive proper

medical care. The Recovery Team cautiously worked not to cut off the blood flow to the partially amputated limb. The pressure needed to be light, just enough to slow blood loss. Each moment that passed was a race against the clock as they carefully lifted the men onto the gurneys. Two Recovery Team medics cautiously lifted the agent suffering from a partially severed arm and several broken ribs onto the field gurney and began walking down the tunnel toward the ladder that led to the sewer gate. The other agent had lacerations to his face and neck and had his femur bone snapped in half. He was unconscious from the pain, having gone into shock. The Recovery Team was aware that it was critical to get the two men to the surface as quickly as possible. They administered morphine to the two agents for the excruciating pain, being one of the more commonly used analgesics administered by field medics who are transporting patients. In addition to being one of the most painful breaks, a broken femur can damage the large arteries in the leg and cause severe bleeding. In some cases, the ends of broken bones can be sharp and can cut or tear surrounding blood vessels or nerves leading to further damage. The Recovery Team medics checked the other two agents who had extremely faint pulses. One suffered a broken neck, while the other was bleeding internally. They decided against the use of morphine for these two agents, as opioids can cause hypotension and respiratory depression that may worsen the effects of hemorrhagic shock. They lifted the agents onto the gurneys and carried them to the ladder, aware that time was against them.

They radioed the Comms Team for an update on where they were with sending someone from New York City's Department of Environmental Protection down there with the key to open the sewer gate. The Comms Team had radioed Agent Dugan when the Recovery Team first informed them of the situation. He immediately reached out to his contact and got in touch with the Governor of New York City to expedite getting someone down there to open the gate. The Comms Team informed them that the sewage maintenance crew was on their way. The damp air was thick with the smell of blood. The Recovery Team was on high alert as they sat on edge, waiting for the maintenance crew to arrive with the key to the sewer gate.

Colonel Fury stood in the central office at Ravencroft looking through the registered list of inmates. He selected five inmates and had the prison guards bring the first one up to the laboratory. The first four inmates selected were from an international terrorist organization that the United States military had at large for smuggling weapons and ammunition to foreign opposition before being captured at sea and imprisoned at Ravencroft. The fifth inmate selected was Russian KGB Agent Dmitri Smerdyakov, who had been imprisoned at Ravencroft after being identified as an espionage agent by the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agency.

The first inmate was brought up to the laboratory completely unaware of what they had planned to do to him. He barely spoke any English

at all but began to plead with them in his native language at the sight of Dr. Stillwell. He fought and resisted while they restrained him to the table and strapped his head down as Dr. Stillwell administered the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum to the man. His pleas for mercy turned to cries for help as he screamed and shouted hysterically.

Odo was present in the laboratory, seeing the repercussions of his actions unfold before his eyes. He had spent the majority of his day in isolation, dwelling on what had become of Richard and Mary Parker due to his hasty decision to leak Dr. Stillwell's classified analysis of the preclinical trials conducted at Ravencroft. He was distraught by the outcome. His expectation of Richard Parker blowing the whistle on Ravencroft and exposing the entire operation was lost. He didn't anticipate Richard taking the spiders from Oscorp or the Agency's response to the security breach: dispatching agents to track and pursue them.

Richard Parker made an error in judgement by taking the spiders from Oscorp. Had he not done so, he may have been able to blow the whistle on Ravencroft and prevent the Human Enhancement Project. Although, it would seem we both made errors in judgement. My efforts to use Dr. Parker to expose the Agency have only accelerated things, thought Odo, remorsefully.

Colonel Fury ordered Odo to prepare the old containment wing that was used during the Human Enhancement Project for holding subjects during observation. Odo was frustrated; his eagerness for vengeance led to an innocent couple's death. He thought of their son, the only child he had ever met in his entire life, who would now be orphaned because of his decision.

What a fool. Why would he attempt to take the spiders? The mistake of breaching security at Oscorp is what alerted Ravencroft, and what cost him and his wife their lives. It wasn't supposed to turn out like this, he thought.

Odo prepared the quarantine chambers that the inmates would occupy following the administration of the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum. The other four inmates were stripped, fitted with patient gowns, and held in their cells until they were ready for them. Dr. Stillwell was elated with the thought of finally having the opportunity to analyze the effects the serum would have on human DNA, especially knowing that Dr. Connors had taken the serum and survived the administration process, raising his expectations of the clinical trials. Odo entered the laboratory after having the inmates gowned in their cells. He watched Dr. Stillwell prepare the serum, realizing that while his thoughts had remained on what had happened to Dr. Parker and his wife, he didn't think to question what serum they were administering to the subjects. He assumed they had reauthorized the Human Enhancement Project and were using the Super Soldier Serum that they had replicated after Dr. Abraham Erskine was assassinated following Project: Captain America. Dr.

Stillwell set the vial on the table; Odo noticed that the label on the vial was not from Ravencroft. He silently made his way around the table in his wheelchair to observe the label: it was from Oscorp. He was confused when he realized that it was the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum. He was aware they had recently found some success with the serum. However, Colonel Fury was generally reserved when it came to these projects and typically preferred to follow protocol, conducting preclinical experiments until there was substantial data to go off, which still needed to be approved.

Dr. Stillwell's analysis was just submitted recently. Could it have swayed the Colonel to commission clinical trials without conclusive results? thought Odo, confused by the decision.

The Colonel had made it very clear that until they could produce a living test subject during preclinical testing, they would not be authorized to conduct clinical trials. They were required to request approval from the Department Policy Board and would need to go through the Department of Defense.

Odo silently made his way over to Dr. Stillwell as he turned the vial upside down and held it up in the air, inserting the needle tip into the vial. He pulled back the plunger to the line on the syringe for the subject's dose. He wanted to ask him why they were clinically trialing Oscorp's Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum but knew better than to question directives. He would have to wait for the right moment following the administration process to ask what prompted the Colonel's decision.

Dr. Stillwell walked to the table where the inmate was strapped down, as tears streamed down the man's face. The man began to speak in a language they could not understand while his heart rate began to spike on the monitor. He injected the serum into the inmate's upper arm while observing his vital signs. He recorded the time as the guards unstrapped the man and brought him to the quarantine chamber while they waited for the serum to take effect.

"Dr. Stillwell, pardon my curiosity—I have been absent during recent events. Why have they authorized clinical testing for Oscorp's Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum?" asked Odo, quietly.

Dr. Stillwell studied him for a moment, while Odo did his best to appear pitiful in his wheelchair.

"Last Friday, following Oscorp's security breach, Dr. Connors self-administered the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum, injecting himself before leaving the laboratory. The serum didn't kill him—it mutated him genetically into an aggressive creature that appears to be reptilian in nature. Despite the Agency's efforts, he still hasn't been caught. They plan to capture him and have us analyze his blood to determine his cellular rate of regeneration. They

authorized these trials to try and get a better understanding of what's happening to him genetically," said Dr. Stillwell.

Odo was in a state of disbelief. He had no idea that Dr. Connors had any involvement in the security breach that took place on Friday. He had only been informed of Richard and Mary Parker's breach of security at Oscorp.

"I see," said Odo, trying to conceal his astonishment.

It was getting late; time was of the essence. Dr. Stillwell turned to the prison guard.

"Bring in the next inmate."

The agent opened his eyes, wondering where he was, as he began to come to. It took him a moment to realize he was in an ambulance, as he was heavily sedated. The city's sewage maintenance crew was able to make it in time to unlock the sewer gate access point, allowing the Recovery Team to get the injured agents to the surface. Agent Dugan arranged for paramedics to be on-site when the Recovery Team surfaced with the surviving agents from the Tactical Unit, so they could be rushed to the hospital. Now that he had contained the situation he needed to notify Colonel Fury on the status of the team. Agent Dugan entered the central office to give the Colonel an update on the injured agents and fatalities that occurred. He stood by and waited as the Colonel appeared to be on an important call. The Colonel hung up the phone and opened a shared file on his computer. Agent Dugan approached the Colonel as he was looking over the document.

"Sir, the Recovery Team successfully retrieved the injured agents. Unfortunately, eight of the agents from the Tactical Unit were fatally injured. The other four are being transported to the hospital with critical injuries," said Agent Dugan.

The Colonel sat back in his chair, visibly disappointed in the outcome. He hadn't anticipated Dr. Connors' transformation being so drastic in such a short amount of time. He sat there looking at the document on his computer.

"I suppose I was too quick to act, and too slow to identify the risk of what we were dealing with. I just got off a call with the Intelligence Department. They sent me the last thing that Dr. Connors was working on before he left Oscorp Friday evening. He was writing an analysis on the new batch of the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum that was shown to be effective preclinically. The time stamp on the file indicates he was working on it right up until Richard Parker knocked on his door. I had Norman Osborn bring me a sample of the new batch to our meeting and had Dr. Stillwell trial it prior to Dr. Connors conducting preclinical trials at Oscorp. Now tell me this, Agent Dugan—why would he be working on writing an analysis if he planned on taking the serum not even an hour later? Perhaps the real question is, what did Richard Parker say to him in that office before taking the spiders and

breaching security that would have caused him to take such drastic measures?" asked the Colonel.

Agent Dugan stood there a moment, contemplating the question, realizing that it didn't make sense for Dr. Connors to work on the analysis if he planned on taking the serum.

"It certainly doesn't add up, sir," said Agent Dugan.

"I'm going to print Dr. Connors' analysis off. I want you to bring it down to the laboratory for Dr. Stillwell to review. It may be useful," said Colonel Fury.

"Yes, sir," said Agent Dugan, as he waited for the Colonel to prepare the document for him.

The Colonel placed the documents into a classified folder and handed Agent Dugan the file. He walked out of the office and down the hallway corridor, as the Colonel's question still lingered in his mind.

Why would Dr. Connors continue to work on the analysis right up until Richard Parker entered his office at the end of the day? That's not something someone would do if they were planning something as irrational as taking the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum, the agent concluded, as he scanned his security badge to the panel and looked through the retinal scan, entering the laboratory.

He walked down the ramp as the prison guards were bringing the Russian subject into the laboratory. Agent Dugan handed Dr. Stillwell the file, informing him that the Colonel ordered that he review Dr. Connors' trial analysis. Dr. Stillwell opened the file and looked through the analysis briefly before handing it over to Odo. He approached the inmate slowly, grinning maniacally at the man while the guards strapped him to the table.

Odo opened the file and looked at the document while Dr. Stillwell prepared the final test subject's dose. He began reading through Dr. Connors' trial analysis and realized that this batch of the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum was developed differently than the method Oscorp had used in the past. Following the contract merger that Oscorp signed with the military, Odo was required to thoroughly review Dr. Parker's NeoGenics research on gene editing and genetic sequencing techniques that were used to genetically engineer the spiders. He was also required to review Dr. Connors' Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum and examine the results of the preclinical trials that were conducted at Oscorp. Originally, Dr. Connors' research was primarily focused on genetically mapping and sequencing the Crested Gecko and Pogona Lizard genome for the basis of the serum. However, the most recent batch was specifically unique because Dr. Connors had used Dr. Parker's gene editing techniques to splice and sequence the DNA of a Salamander, Chameleon, Black Spiny-Tailed Iguana, Crocodylidae, and Lacertid, otherwise

known as a true lizard, to develop the basis of the serum. Restoration of the lizard tail is an example of autotomy, inducing epimorphic regeneration, which is an injury-mediated process wherein the wound site becomes the focal point for a proliferating aggregation of cells, called the blastema. In salamanders, such as Urodeles, which are distinct amphibian groups known for their regenerative abilities; epimorphic regeneration is characterized by formation of two key structures: a wound and a blastema.

Salamanders are a group of amphibians typically characterized by their lizard-like appearance. This group of amphibians are capable of regenerating lost limbs as well as other damaged parts of their bodies. Dr. Connors' research was initially based specifically on the lizard genome. However, his research on the salamander genome, became of interest with the hope of reverse engineering the regenerative processes for potential human medical applications, such as limbs, brain and spinal cord injury treatment, or preventing harmful scarring during heart surgery recovery. The remarkable ability of salamanders to regenerate is not just limited to limbs, but extends to vital organs such as the heart, jaw, and parts of the spinal cord; showing their uniqueness compared to different types of vertebrates. This ability unlike the lizard is most remarkable for occurring without any type of scarring, making salamanders an invaluable model organism in NeoGenics research aimed at understanding and achieving regenerative processes for medical advancements in human and animal biology.

Why would Dr. Connors use Dr. Parker's genetic sequencing and gene editing techniques to splice Salamander, Lizard, Chameleon, Black Spiny-Tailed Iguana, and Crocodylidae DNA in the serum? Why wouldn't he trial them separately first? At any rate, it would seem the reptilian genome is much more dominant than the amphibious salamander, which is why Dr. Connors has primarily taken on reptilian characteristics, thought Odo, fascinated by the analysis.

Odo watched Dr. Stillwell administer the serum to the Russian KGB Agent Dmitri Smerdyakov. He begged and screamed while he violently shook and twisted in the restraints. Dr. Stillwell monitored the vitals of the Russian as he cried helplessly on the table before having the prison guards unstrap him and take him to the quarantine chamber for further observation. It was disturbing to watch. Odo had never seen any of his predecessors display such an air of satisfaction while conducting clinical trials.

Odo informed Dr. Stillwell of his thoughts on Dr. Connors' trial analysis and the fact that he used Dr. Parker's genetic sequencing and gene editing techniques to splice the Salamander, Chameleon, Black Spiny-Tailed Iguana, Crocodylidae, and Lizard DNA in the most recent serum batch.

"That would explain why this batch of the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum seemed to be so aggressive during preclinical trials. With that many

different species of reptilian DNA spliced and edited in the serum, it's simply a matter of which gene's were sequenced together," said Dr. Stillwell, as they reviewed the analysis together.

"Forgive me, Dr. Stillwell. I couldn't help but notice you administered the serum intravenously to the last subject. Injecting the serum directly into the bloodstream can provide systemic delivery and often leads to the serum being taken up by organs such as the liver. If foreign DNA enters the liver, it can trigger genomic alterations, affect cellular function by changing gene expression and DNA patterns, or be cleared by the liver's immune cells," said Odo, curiously.

"I had five subjects to experiment on and no way of knowing what method of administration Dr. Connors used on himself. Therefore, I gave the serum to each inmate using a different method of administration in an attempt to observe the effects that each process has on the subjects. The first subject was administered the serum intradermally, injecting the serum into the top layer of skin. The second subject received a subcutaneous administration, injecting the serum into the fatty tissue of the upper arm just below the skin at a 45-degree angle. The third subject received an intramuscular injection, delivering the serum directly into the muscle, bypassing the digestive system for quick absorption into the bloodstream. The forth subject received an intranasal administration. When the serum makes contact with the nasal mucosa, it is absorbed and delivered directly to the cerebrospinal fluid and brain via the olfactory nerve pathway, bypassing the blood-brain barrier. The fifth and final subject was administered the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum intravenously into the bloodstream. The serum is delivered directly into a vein, circulating throughout the body," said Dr. Stillwell, with a twisted grin.

Monstrous, thought Odo, realizing Dr. Stillwell was every bit the mad scientist he always believed him to be.

They decided they would continue the analysis in the morning. It was already after eight o'clock in the evening, and they were both mentally exhausted. Odo left for the day, returning to his living accommodations on the small island. Dr. Stillwell was escorted by Agent Dugan to the helicopter launchpad. He arrived home that night after ten o'clock, exhausted, but also exhilarated. He went into his closet and lifted a panel that was concealed in the floorboard, where he had a cell phone hidden. He dialed the only number that was saved in the phone, waiting anxiously as it rang.

"Yes?" said a mysterious voice.

"Excuse me for calling at this time of night, sir. I wanted to inform the Kingpin that we've had an unexpected turn of events take place tonight. I've been commissioned to clinically trial a Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum from Oscorp," said Dr. Stillwell.

The man on the other end of the line remained silent for a moment before speaking.

“Does this have anything to do with the security breach that took place at Oscorp on Friday?” asked the stranger on the line.

“Yes, sir. I found out this afternoon that Dr. Richard Parker breached Oscorp’s security, taking the spiders that were genetically engineered, and was subsequently killed in a motor vehicle accident with his wife. I was also informed that his partner, Dr. Curt Connors, self-administered the Reptilian Gene Therapy Serum, injecting himself before leaving Oscorp Friday evening. He has since mutated into a reptilian creature that the Agency has yet to detain,” said Dr. Stillwell.

“Thank you for the update, Dr. Stillwell. I’ll inform the Kingpin of these unexpected events concerning Dr. Connors,” said the mysterious man, as the phone cut out.

Peter Parker

Peter sat on a bench in the hallway of the funeral home, while friends and coworkers of his parents attended the wake. He could see the caskets through the open doorway from the hall as he sat there, broken. His once happy life with his parents was completely shattered and gone. He had been feeling ill with a fever the last few days. He was homesick, and the thought of not sleeping in his own bed again tonight made it that much worse. He wanted to disappear and not have to deal with the thought that everything he loved about his life would now be absent from it. He watched the people line up outside the doorway to sign the funeral logbook, as if that somehow mattered. They lined up to pay their respects, standing in front of the open caskets where his parents lay for a moment of silence, and in a few hours they would go to lunch and carry on with their lives. He felt an overwhelming rush of emotions knowing that when everyone was gone, and his parents were buried, he would be alone. He felt like a burden to his Uncle Ben and Aunt May, who were extremely kind and loved him but never asked for this responsibility. Now, they were stuck in this circumstance, just as he was, without a choice.

They could have sent me off to some boarding school, he thought, trying to remind himself to be grateful.

His Aunt May came out of the viewing area and found Peter sitting on the bench alone in the hallway.

"Peter, there's a young lady that was asking for you in the viewing area," said May, as Peter stood up and followed her.

He entered the viewing area and saw that the young lady his Aunt May spoke of was Gwen Stacy. She saw him enter the room and immediately went over and embraced him, as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, Peter. I didn't know how to get a hold of you," she sobbed.

He had tried to remain strong throughout the day while friends and acquaintances of his parents came to the funeral home to pay their respects, but he couldn't hold it in with Gwen. Overcome with grief, she held him tight as tears streamed down his face. He felt as though time stood still in her arms, feeling for the first time since finding out his parents were gone like there was something worth waking up for tomorrow. He couldn't talk; all he could do was stand there in front of her as he looked down at the floor. She grabbed his hand and led him out into the foyer of the funeral home where it would just be them. He wiped his eyes and did his best to compose himself as they stopped and stood there for a moment.

"I'm sorry, I wanted to call you. I've just been…" he paused for a moment, searching for the words as she interjected.

"You don't need to apologize, Peter. I can't begin to imagine what you must be going through. It doesn't seem real, especially with the accusations being made in the newspaper. I don't believe it for one second," she said, assuring him.

Peter looked at her, confused. He wasn't sure what she was talking about.

"What accusations are being made in the newspaper?" asked Peter, as he studied her expression.

"You haven't heard?" she asked.

She hadn't considered that he might not have known about what was printed in the newspaper. She realized that this would only cause him more pain, which was not her intention. The only reason she knew about the newspaper article was because of her father, who, as suspicious as he usually was, also questioned the accusations.

"No," said Peter, trying his best to maintain his composure.

"I'm so sorry, Peter. I thought you knew about what they were claiming in the newspaper," she said, wishing that she hadn't brought it up.

"What did it say?"

She stood there a moment, trying to select her words carefully. She didn't want to cause him any more grief than he had already been through.

"I heard from my dad that there was a story in the newspaper accusing your parents of committing treason. A few days later they printed a follow up story claiming that Dr. Connors was suspected to be an accomplice. He vanished from Oscorp following the incident with your parents and is wanted by the police," she said, not sure what else to say about it.

"Treason?" he said, confused, as he stood there staring off, recounting the events in his mind of that fateful day.

He was frustrated. He wasn't sure why his dad wanted to take the spiders from Oscorp.

Why wouldn't they tell me what was going on? They weren't themselves; something was wrong. What were they hiding? wondered Peter, as he stood there silently.

He didn't have a response to give Gwen, making the moment feel like an eternity.

"I don't know what happened. They dropped me off at my Uncle Ben's and said they'd be back," said Peter, unsure if he should say anything

else until he figured out why his parents were acting so strange.

He couldn't bring himself to tell her how unusually secretive they were behaving that week leading up to it, or how tense and paranoid they seemed that day.

"It's alright, Peter. You don't need to worry about that right now. I don't believe any of it. I mean, come on, the newspaper's saying there's a giant lizard in the subway tunnels of New York. It's clearly not the most reliable source," said Gwen, reassuring him.

He nodded, unaware of the lizard story and what had recently taken place. She embraced him again, knowing what he must be feeling. Her mother was standing there, watching the two of them. She approached to inform Gwen that they would be leaving.

"Gwen, your father has gone out to the car and is waiting for us. My deepest condolences, Peter," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder as she walked past them towards the exit.

"Will you be coming back to school? How can I get in touch with you?" asked Gwen.

"I don't think I'll be able to come back after everything that's happened. I'm staying with my aunt and uncle in Queens. I can give you the phone number, but I don't have a pen," said Peter, as he looked over at the logbook.

Gwen opened up her small purse, having already thought of asking for his contact information. She handed him a pen and a small pad of paper to write the phone number down on. He did his best to steady his hands, which were visibly shaking, as he handed the pen and pad back to her. She hugged him, squeezing tightly, not knowing when she would see him again.

"I'm glad I got to see you today," said Peter, suddenly feeling a wave of emotion as they said their goodbyes.

"I'll always be here for you, Peter," she said, holding his hands before turning for the exit.

He watched her leave, uncertain of the next time he would see her, but felt at peace knowing that he still had her in his life. The rest of the day felt surreal. The emotional tone of the ceremonial wake had left him exhausted. He had a fever and felt extremely unwell but didn't mention it to his aunt and uncle. He had to be there for his parents' funeral no matter how he was feeling. They lowered the caskets into the ground while Peter quietly wept. His uncle put his arm around his shoulder, trying to console him, as he grieved the loss of his only brother and sister-in-law.

Peter's world would never be the same, and the realization of it was setting in. Everything he knew was gone, and he had to face that new reality

now. He left the funeral home with his aunt and uncle after they buried his parents, and they drove back to their small home. The mood was somber; they were silent for most of the ride home. He unbuckled his seatbelt as they pulled into the driveway. He got out of the car, walked up the driveway, and went inside the house. Peter's fever was progressively getting worse. He needed to get out of his damp suit and into some dry clothes.

A few days ago, his Uncle Ben drove him to get some of his belongings from his parents' house. He needed to get his suit for the funeral, and his uncle asked him to pack up some clothing, along with his toothbrush and a few books to keep his mind occupied. The moment he opened the door to the house, the emotions that he had kept bottled up came pouring out. His uncle had agreed to wait in the car for him while he gathered his things. He went upstairs and stopped outside his parents' bedroom. The emptiness he felt left him sobbing, as he was overtaken with emotion that he had not allowed himself to feel. He tried to compose himself, but the silence was deafening; he couldn't bear it any longer. He gathered his things as quickly as he could and left. His uncle assured him that he would be able to bring all his belongings from his bedroom to the house once they had the funeral for his parents.

He shut the door to the spare bedroom and changed out of his damp suit into something warm and comfortable, but he couldn't stop shaking. He felt unbearably cold, although he was burning up. His Aunt May knocked on the door of the spare bedroom that Peter had been staying in.

"I'm going to make dinner now. Are you hungry, dear?" she asked, noticing he didn't look well.

"I'm feeling exhausted at the moment, Aunt May. Would it be alright if I had a nap first?" he asked, trying not to let on how terrible he felt.

She walked over to him and put her hand on his forehead.

"You're burning up," she said, worried that he had become sick with grief.

"I'm alright, Aunt May. I think I just need some rest," he said.

She agreed to put his dinner in the fridge for him so he could have it when he woke up. Over the course of the next several days, Peter's fever finally broke. However, he began to feel an aching in his bones like he had never experienced before. It was so bad, it got to the point where his aunt was insisting they bring him to the hospital's emergency room, but Peter pleaded with them that he didn't need to go. His Uncle Ben assured his Aunt May not to worry, believing it was simply growing pains. He recalled having pain in his legs as a boy before growing several inches that year. His Uncle Ben had his aunt draw a hot bath for him every night to help ease the pain he was experiencing.

His graduation marked another sad time for him, as he was unable to attend the ceremony. He wanted nothing more than to have things back the way they were, to be at Oscorp with his parents, and to graduate with Gwen at the top of their class. He had worked so hard to achieve his grades and just wanted to be able to select his marine program specialization with Gwen, as they had planned to do all year. Sadly, those dreams were gone now. His aunt and uncle discussed enrolling him in the public school district in Queens this coming September. The thought of being educated somewhere new was overwhelming and made him feel anxious. He had only ever gone to Oscorp's Institution of Academic Excellence, which was a private school. He had seen the schools in the public district when driving to visit his aunt and uncle with his parents. He always thought they looked more like prison institutions than schools, having bars on the windows and high fences around the perimeter.

Gwen had called him before their graduation to see if he would be attending and was disappointed when she found out that he wouldn't be. He asked her about the marine program and what she selected to be her specialization, finding out to his surprise that Dr. Richards and the other members of the oceanography team had not been back to Oscorp since their expedition into the Mariana Trench. She told him that when she inquired about the team, she was informed that they had been working at another facility. Peter suspected they were working out of the military facility his father spoke of, Ravencroft.

As time passed, the aches in his body became more tolerable. He had gotten used to the pain, and eventually it began to subside after several weeks. However, he began to notice other things were happening that he couldn't explain. He noticed a weird, sticky substance would sometimes secrete from what appeared to be two tiny openings located in the same spot in the seam of each wrist. He initially thought it was some sort of infection as he inspected the small openings, although he eventually dismissed the notion, as it wasn't painful. They weren't noticeable at a glance, as the tiny openings lined up with the crease in his wrist and were extremely small. He wasn't sure what was happening. He hadn't felt like himself since his parents passed away. He had spent most of his time in bed reading, trying to distract himself from the constant aching he felt in his bones. He kept it to himself, worried his aunt and uncle would think there was something wrong with him and send him to the hospital to be tested. He just wanted to be left alone to read in the spare bedroom that he now occupied in his aunt and uncle's home.

His aunt and uncle dismissed his behavior, believing he was severely depressed, having just lost both his parents. However, as more time passed, other oddities began to happen. One evening, while he lay there reading, he turned the page of the book and tore it accidentally as he tried to let go of the page. When he opened his hand, the torn piece of paper was stuck to his

index finger. He tried to remove the piece of paper only for it to tear again, leaving a smaller piece still stuck to his finger. Confused, he got up and walked to the bathroom to wash his hands, thinking that he must have touched something sticky without realizing. However, it didn't make sense—he had been reading for a while and had turned several pages prior to the incident. After washing his hands and removing the piece of paper that was stuck to his finger, he noticed there were tiny, fine hairs that could be seen on his fingertips, which retracted into what appeared to be hair follicles. He sat on the ledge of the bathtub, wondering if that's what he felt the other night when he removed his socks for bed. He placed his foot across his knee, trying to see if there were tiny, fine hairs on the bottom of his feet as well. He couldn't see anything at the moment, but distinctly felt his socks stick to his feet the other night when he tried to take them off. He got up and stood there in the bathroom for some time, wondering what was happening to him. He couldn't tell his aunt and uncle out of fear they would think there was something wrong with him psychologically. Luckily, the hairs were so fine that they could barely be seen even when they were exposed. It had been bad enough that he was in tears every night from the body aches, causing his aunt and uncle to worry. He knew they were speaking about his condition and odd behavior in private lately. It was only out of concern, but it made him feel even more alienated.

The weather was starting to get warmer, though the rain still persisted. When the pain wasn't too bad, he would go out and explore the area, never going too far out of fear he'd get lost. He had never been allowed to roam the streets alone; his parents were far too protective. However, his aunt and uncle weren't as strict as his parents were. They figured it would be good for him if he were to get outside and make some friends. He found an old, abandoned factory behind the train tracks that would change his world forever.

One afternoon he decided to go inside the factory and have a look around. Several of the windows had been smashed, leaving glass and debris on the floor below. He figured it was most likely from the neighborhood kids, as there were empty liquor bottles littered throughout the factory. He walked over and picked up a large piece of glass from a broken window and sat down on the steps. While he held the piece of glass in his hand, he could see the hairs on the tips of his fingers through the glass. He examined them, trying to understand what was happening, thinking back to what happened while he was reading. He wondered if the glass would stick to his fingers like the page of the book had. He opened his hand, attempting to let go of the glass; to his astonishment, the glass remained affixed to his outstretched fingers. He stood up, becoming concerned with the thought of how he would remove the piece of glass, which appeared to be stuck. He tried to remain calm, reminding himself that most of the time, he was fine touching things. This

had only happened twice before. He observed the hairs through the glass and tried concentrating on them to see if he could control them. To his amazement, the tiny hairs on his fingertips retracted into the follicles, and the piece of glass fell to the floor. He sighed with relief, thankful that he didn't have to go home to his aunt and uncle and reveal another strange anomaly that he couldn't explain. He was walking towards the exit of the abandoned factory when he suddenly got the idea to try and test his newly discovered ability.

If paper and glass are sticking to my fingers, can I stick to things that I touch? he wondered.

He walked toward the exit and placed his hand on the wall beside the door, but nothing seemed to happen.

Why does it only happen sometimes? he thought, as he stood there looking at his hands.

He focused intently on trying to make the extremely fine hairs appear when suddenly, they emerged out of tiny follicles embedded in the dermis of his fingertips. He sat back down on the steps and removed his shoes and socks to see if his suspicions were correct. He placed his foot across his knee and focused on trying to control the tiny, fine hairs on his feet. He watched them appear, completely astonished as he sat there inspecting them curiously. He walked over to the wall barefoot and raised his arm, placing his hand on the brick. To his amazement, he realized that he could cling to the surface of the wall if he concentrated on it, but it was extremely difficult to control. He spent the rest of the afternoon fixated on developing his newfound ability in the abandoned factory.

Since it was the summer break, he was able to go there every day, spending hours practicing how to control the ability. The abandoned factory became his secret getaway place where he could escape his grief and disappear. He thought about how he came to acquire the ability and concluded that it must have been caused by the spider bite when he was transferring the genetically engineered spiders from the terrarium to the portable container. His father used a sample of his own DNA to genetically edit and sequence with the genomes of three species of spiders, which was likely the cause for the cohesion of molecules in Peter's DNA. The transcription of RNA copied from the DNA that was introduced, produced genetic information for protein synthesis causing reverse transcription. The foreign RNA was copied back into DNA, which was then inserted into his genome.

As the weeks passed, he learned how to control his newfound ability, and grew more confident, climbing higher up the wall each day. Once he felt that he had mastered the ability, he decided to challenge himself. When he reached the height of the wall, he turned and descended upside down,

feeling the weight of his body in his arms and shoulders.

That night, he sat at the dinner table with his aunt and uncle discussing the evening news. His aunt and uncle watched the evening news together every night during supper. Unlike his parents, they allowed him to watch it with them. They were unaware that Richard and Mary had sheltered Peter to the extent of not allowing him to follow current world events. There had been another alleged sighting of the lizard, which was what the news station had been calling the creature following the newspaper story the Daily Bugle printed. This recent sighting was reported by a sewer maintenance foreman who was performing repairs on a municipal storm drain. The news anchor went on to state that this was the second time in a month that there had been a report of the lizard. It was first reported in the subway tunnels, and now it had allegedly been seen in the sewer systems.

This must be what Gwen was talking about at my parents' funeral, thought Peter, completely enthralled by the story.

"Do you really think there's a giant lizard in the sewer system, Uncle Ben?" asked Peter, curious to see what his uncle thought.

"I think there was a time when you could rely on the media in this city. Back then, there were real stories, with integrity, from real investigative journalists. Nowadays, it seems like everyone's just in it for a quick paycheck," said Ben, who seemed rather disenchanted.

"Maybe there's more to it, Ben. You said the story in the newspaper was reported by Edward Brock. He was an investigative journalist you admired greatly at one point in time," said May.

"That was before, when he wasn't afraid to write about controversial topics that other journalists swept under the rug. He had a backbone; that's why I supported him. Back then, he wouldn't have covered this nonsense," scoffed Ben.

They finished their dinner. Peter put his dishes in the sink and thanked his aunt for the meal, then headed upstairs to the spare bedroom that now belonged to him. His aunt called up to him as he stopped halfway up the stairs and looked down to see what she wanted.

"Peter, take a shower tonight, dear. I know you washed them, but your hands are filthy," she said, bluntly.

Peter looked at his hands, realizing she was right. Although he washed his hands thoroughly when he got back from the abandoned factory, he couldn't quite get them clean. He had been crawling around for the last couple of weeks, making it difficult to get his hands and fingernails clean.

"Okay, Aunt May, I will," said Peter, somewhat embarrassed.

Ben was rinsing his dish as May came back into the kitchen. She

heard the bathroom door shut upstairs.

"Did you see how filthy his hands were?" asked May, while Ben stood at the kitchen sink.

"Try not to discourage the boy from being active, May. It's good for him to get out and get dirty. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen him get his hands dirty before," said Ben, truthfully.

"I'm not discouraging him from playing outside. I'm just encouraging him to be mindful of good hygienic practices," said May, in a motherly manner.

Peter got into the shower, realizing his feet were just as dirty as his hands were. He had been crawling up and down the walls of the abandoned factory with no shoes on for several weeks. He found he could wear his socks and still manage to cling to the walls of the factory. Although he didn't realize this until over a week of practicing, his socks also tore easily and clearly didn't prevent his feet from getting dirty. That night, he lay in bed inspecting the other oddity that occurred after being bitten by the spider at Oscorp: the tiny openings in the crease of his wrists. He wondered what they were, and why they would sometimes secrete what seemed like small amounts of some sort of sticky substance.

His hands were sore; he had been climbing and descending the factory walls every day for several weeks straight. He lay there massaging his hands, thinking about the strange story of the lizard that had been reported. While he was rubbing his palm with his thumb, a thin, sticky strand suddenly shot out from the tiny opening in his wrist. Startled, he jumped out of bed, realizing the thin strand was stuck to the wall. He walked over and inspected the strand; it appeared to be a sticky organic substance that was akin to the web of a spider. He stood there completely amazed by what had just happened. He tried pulling the strand of web, but it was like contact cement and would not come off. He wondered how he would explain this web like substance that was stuck to the wall to his Aunt May and Uncle Ben. He paced his room trying to think of what to do. He cracked open the bedroom door and crept downstairs to search for a pair of scissors. His aunt and uncle were sitting in the living room on the couch watching television. He looked through the kitchen drawers but couldn't find them. Instead, he settled on the largest steak knife he could find and went back upstairs to his bedroom. He quietly shut the bedroom door and attempted to cut the thin strand of web, to no avail. It was extremely tough considering how thin the strand was. It didn't make sense to Peter.

How can a strand of web this thin be so strong? he thought, anxiously.

He was now really starting to worry about how he would explain

what this was to his aunt and uncle. He grabbed the thin strand of web and pulled as hard as he could. In an instant he went flying backwards, crashing into his bed as the drywall gave out. He opened his eyes, looking up at the wall, only to find a hole where the web was attached. He could hear his aunt and uncle coming up the stairs to check what the commotion was. He quickly tossed the piece of drywall along with the web attached to it under the bed and ran over to the wall where the hole was. His Aunt May and Uncle Ben called out to him as they opened the door to find him holding his head, pretending to have fallen into the wall.

"What happened?" asked his Uncle Ben, as Peter stood there searching for an explanation.

He was never much of a liar, but in this case, he made up for it with ingenuity as he stood there holding his head.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Ben. I got dizzy and fell over," said Peter, immediately feeling guilty for being untruthful.

"My word, Peter! Are you alright?" asked May, concerned he had hurt himself.

"I'm alright, Aunt May a. I just feel bad for putting hole in the wall," said Peter.

"It's only drywall, Peter. It's no big deal. I can patch it. Are you sure you're alright?" asked Ben.

"I'm alright, Uncle Ben. Can I help fix it?" asked Peter, feeling terrible after seeing the damage he caused.

"Sure, Peter. I'll give you your first lesson in patching drywall. Make sure you get some rest," said Ben, trying to make light of the incident as he closed the door to the bedroom that his nephew now occupied.

Peter sat there a moment, still processing what had just happened. He was feeling like the last month had been a series of strange events that he couldn't explain. He knelt down and pulled the thin strand of web attached to the drywall out from under the bed. He sat there for the next hour inspecting the organic webbing, wondering how he was able to produce the substance the way he had. He was hesitant to massage his hands anymore out of fear that the strange webbing would shoot out again. He decided he would try and replicate the incident tomorrow at the abandoned factory. He hid the strand of web and the piece of drywall under the bed and shut the light off. He lay there in bed while his mind raced, wondering what was happening to him. The more he thought about everything, the more it became clear that it was in fact the result of the spider bite. His body was changing without question, which was likely the reason his bones ached the way they had been all summer.

He woke the next morning to his Aunt May knocking on his bedroom door to tell him that breakfast was ready. He told her he'd be right down as he stretched out in bed. Looking over at the wall, he was reminded of the piece of drywall and strand of web under the bed. He kicked the blanket off and knelt down to pull the thin stand of web attached to the drywall from under the bed. When he grabbed the strand and pulled it out from under the bed, he was shocked to find that the strand was no longer sticky and broke easily in his hand. He held the small piece of web in his hand examining it, realizing it had dried up overnight. He knelt back down and reached under the bed, grabbing the piece of drywall it had been stuck to. To his surprise, he was able to remove the dried up web from the drywall with his finger. It had all but turned to dust overnight, as he sat there on the floor inspecting the crumbling strand of webbing.

If only I knew this last night, I could have saved Uncle Ben the hassle of fixing the wall, thought Peter.

However, this was advantageous, as he could now practice his newfound ability without the worry of someone finding the webbing. He swept up the thin strand of web that had dried up and turned to dust using a card and a piece of paper, then flushed it down the toilet. He washed up and went downstairs for breakfast. He felt unusually hungry, which was uncharacteristic, as he never had much of an appetite. He sat down at the table and scarfed down his breakfast, even taking a couple of pieces of fruit. His Uncle Ben was glad to see that he had his appetite back; he hadn't eaten very much or been himself since the night of his parents' death, understandably. He told his aunt and uncle that he was going out for a walk and would be back before dinner. He reminded his uncle that he wanted to help patch the drywall that he damaged. His Uncle Ben told him he still needed to pick up the putty from the hardware store along with a tin of paint. He assured him they'd get around to it, but not to worry. Peter insisted that he be there to help repair it when he had everything and was ready to fix it, still feeling guilty about the incident.

Ben had taken some bereavement time from work so he could sort out his brother's affairs after his passing and move Peter's belongings to their home. Richard and Mary had left everything to Peter in their will, but Peter was not of age to receive his inheritance. As Peter's legal guardian and godfather, Ben was required to hold the inheritance until Peter reaches the age of eighteen and becomes an adult. Ben had hired a real estate agent to sell his brother's home with the assistance of an attorney to arrange for it to go into Peter's trust fund with the rest of his inheritance.

Peter passed through the chain fence that had been cut outside the abandoned factory and made his way inside the building, quietly listening for the sound of others. He was always cautious of others entering the building while he was in there testing his newfound abilities. He suspected it was

mischievous kids that smashed the windows and left the liquor bottles scattered throughout the factory. Once he was sure there was no one else in there, he sat down on the steps and began to inspect his wrist, wondering how he made the web shoot out. He recalled he had been massaging his hands, as they had been sore from crawling up and down the walls for two weeks straight. He began to massage his hand the same way he did last night, trying to replicate the incident. He could feel two small lumps in his palm that he had never noticed before that felt like a gland of some kind. He noticed that while he was massaging the gland in his palm, the tiny opening in his wrist where the web shot out began to secrete a sticky substance.

How did I get it to shoot out so fast last night? he wondered, as he examined the substance that had secreted from the tiny opening in the seam of his wrist.

He pressed down on the lower half of his palm where he felt the gland. He could feel a divot in the middle of the gland, which almost felt like a tiny peanut that was still in the shell. He continued to massage his hand, but still, nothing happened. He wondered if he had to give it a few days, thinking that maybe there was a limit to the amount of web he could produce. He rubbed his thumb across the gland while he sat on the steps, inspecting the small opening in his wrist. He tried pressing his middle and ring finger down on the two tiny glands at the same time. Without warning, the web shot out at a speed comparable to a bullet being fired from a gun. It shot all the way across the factory and stuck to the wall. Peter jumped to his feet in amazement. He couldn't believe how far it shot, which he estimated to be over eighty feet away. He ran over and inspected the webbing that had struck the factory wall approximately four feet off the ground. Curious, he tested the strength of the web by pulling it to see how strong it was; he knew it was strong enough to break drywall. The wall in the factory was made of brick, giving him the confidence to pull as hard as he could and not have to worry about breaking it. The web had elasticity to it, stretching slightly, but to his absolute astonishment, no matter how hard he pulled the thin strand of web, he couldn't break it from the wall. He stood there amazed, wondering how he had produced something so strong.

He remembered that one of the three spiders his father had selected to be genetically engineered was the Darwin's bark spider. The spider's dragline silk is unique due to its ability to stretch and retain its total tensile strength, which is unmatched by any other fiber, including Kevlar. The Darwin's Bark spider has the strongest silk ever found. It's twice as strong as normal dragline silk and ten times the strength of Kevlar.

He attempted to try it again, this time aiming higher on the wall, while trying to grab the end of the strand of web when it hit the wall. He wanted to see if he could pull himself up the wall using the web, believing it could easily hold his weight. He pressed down on the gland again using his

middle and ring finger. The web shot from his wrist, affixing near the top of the wall roughly thirty feet high as he clutched the strand. He pulled the web a few times to make sure it was secure to the wall, then began to pull himself up the web until he made it to the top, then descended back down the web.

After testing out if the web could hold his body weight, he had the idea of trying to hit a target by shooting the webbing at an empty liquor bottle he found. He placed the empty bottle on the steps and walked approximately twenty feet away. He tried looking down the length of his arm as he pressed down on the gland in his palm. The web shot out with unbelievable speed but missed the target completely. He continued for an hour straight but was unable to hit a single target. Surprisingly, he was still able to continue, as his body seemed to have no problem producing the webbing. He realized that the technique he was implementing of looking down his arm was the cause of his failure. Discouraged, he sat there for a while, wondering if there was a better way he could aim it.

He was never athletically inclined, and his father certainly wasn't a sportsman, nor did he ever have the desire to try and teach Peter. However, his Uncle Ben bought him a baseball glove for his birthday a few years ago and taught him how to play catch. He thought back to what his uncle told him when he was teaching him how to throw a ball to the target.

He told me to look at where I wanted the ball to go and just throw it, thought Peter, as he stood up to give it another try.

Looking at the bottle, he held out his arm and pressed down on the gland in his palm as it shot out, hitting the target perfectly. Peter jumped in the air with such excitement, he startled himself by how high he was able to jump. He leapt approximately six feet off the ground without intention; it was almost effortless. He walked over to the bottle and set it back on the stairs to see if he was able to hit the target again or if it was simply a fluke. He looked at the empty liquor bottle, raised his arm, and pressed the gland in his palm. The web shot out from the tiny opening in his wrist, hitting the target again. He was stunned that he did it twice in a row. It felt surprisingly natural to him, which struck him as odd seeing as he was never any good even after Uncle Ben had taught him how to play catch. He went home that evening completely fixated on his new ability and was excited to continue practicing again tomorrow. He opened the front door as his Aunt May was fixing the table. His uncle was sitting on the couch in the living room watching the news.

"You're just in time; I hope you're hungry. Go wash up for dinner, dear," said Aunt May.

"Okay, Aunt May. I'm completely famished," said Peter, as he kicked his shoes off and ran upstairs to wash up.

He had an insatiable appetite for the last week now, which was extremely unusual for him. However, he dismissed the abnormality, believing it was simply due to the physical activities he had been doing lately, which his body wasn't used to. He came back down stairs still excited from the success he had with his newfound ability today. Uncle Ben got up from the couch and sat down at the table with Peter.

"You were gone all day today. You must be starving," said Uncle Ben, as he glanced down at Peter's hands casually to see if they were filthy.

Peter had been practicing his aim, trying to web shoot liquor bottles all afternoon, so his hands weren't as dirty today.

"Has the news reported anything else on the lizard in the sewer, Uncle Ben?" asked Peter, curiously.

"It's just a story, Peter. There's nothing to worry about. There's no giant lizard in the sewer," said Uncle Ben.

What his uncle didn't realize was that Peter wasn't scared of the stories—he was fascinated by them. He hadn't been able to stop thinking about the story since he heard it on the news the other night and recalled Gwen mentioning it at his parents' funeral. Despite his better judgement, he had an unrelenting urge to venture into the sewers to try and track the creature and see for himself if the stories were true. However, the idea of making his way through a filthy sewer was enough to make him think twice. Although, strangely enough, the thought still persisted, even when he tried to reason with himself.

Over the next couple of weeks, all of his free time was spent at his secret getaway spot: the old, abandoned factory, where he practiced perfecting his newfound abilities. He brought some plastic bottles to practice with instead of using the empty liquor bottles that were littered throughout the factory, which made too much noise. The last thing he wanted was to attract attention and be seen using his abilities. He filled some empty plastic soda bottles with water and brought them in his backpack, which served much better as targets. He spent every day practicing new ways of using his strange abilities. He tried to hit the target with his web while he was clinging to the wall in different positions. His persistence paid off, as he was able to master it, to his surprise. It had become easier to control his abilities, and they felt more natural to him with each passing day.

The following morning, he woke up to his aunt knocking on his door, telling him to come down for breakfast. He told her he'd be right down as he got out of bed. He washed up and got dressed groggily, yawning on his way down the stairs. He walked into the kitchen to find his uncle sitting at the table flipping through the newspaper, while his Aunt May was busy setting the table, chatting away to him. She glanced up at him and suddenly stopped

talking. She looked him up and down, then looked at Ben, who also appeared to be looking at him strangely. Peter stood there, looking at their facial expressions, confused as to why they were looking at him like that.

"What's the matter?" he asked, suddenly feeling insecure.

They looked at each other in disbelief and looked back at him, dumbfounded. Both were at a loss for words as he stood there waiting for an explanation. Ben stood up and walked over, looking up at him. Peter nearly stood a full three inches taller than him. Ben proudly carried the title of the tallest Parker, standing at 5'8". Judging by how small Peter was at the beginning of the summer, Ben figured he'd be lucky to reach his father's height of 5'6".

"My word, child! I've never seen anything like it. It's as though you sprouted overnight," said May, standing there in amazement.

"It looks like you've taken the title as the tallest Parker," said Ben, still shocked by how much taller Peter had gotten.

Peter was just as surprised. He hadn't realized it when he woke up, due to being so tired and groggy.

"Sit and have some breakfast, dear," said Aunt May.

"Thanks, Aunt May," said Peter, as he sat down at the table.

"That's definitely the reason you've been in agony all summer. I knew it had to be growing pains. I had them when I was your age, but it makes sense now why yours were so bad," said Ben.

Peter agreed, thinking that was likely the cause for the extreme pain, but wasn't entirely sure. If only his uncle knew just how many other changes he had been going through recently, he'd understand his reason for uncertainty.

"That explains your appetite as of late. I've noticed you've been eating quite a bit more than you were before," said May.

He couldn't argue with that; Peter had noticed it himself. He had been feeling unusually hungry lately.

"If you keep eating like this, you're going to eat us out of house and home," chuckled Uncle Ben.

He finished his breakfast and went upstairs to his bedroom to look through his options for what courses he wanted to take at school next month. The summer was going by fast, and he had no desire to look at anything school-related. It only reminded him of Oscorp, his parents, and Gwen. He was going to be enrolling in the public school district, which he had not been looking forward to. He selected the courses, thinking of what he would have selected had he still been at Oscorp with his parents and Gwen.

He wept quietly, grieving alone in his room, thinking how he would give up these newfound abilities in an instant if he could just have his parents and old life back.

He spent the majority of the afternoon sitting in his room, anxiously thinking about going to a new school for the first time and what it would be like. City kids were different; they were harder than the kids that were educated privately. He wouldn't have to wear a uniform to school for the first time, which felt odd to him. He never had to pick out clothes to wear on a daily basis, finding it to be difficult, and was worried he wouldn't fit in. He didn't have the same style of clothing the kids from the neighborhood that were his age had. He had grown up wearing casual dress slacks and dress shoes, usually with a button-up dress shirt, a polo shirt, or a sweater, when not attending school. But lately he had been wearing the track uniforms that were provided by Oscorp, along with his tennis shoes that he used to wear while taking part in his physical education program. He figured he wouldn't need them anymore, and they were the most comfortable thing he had to wear while doing physical activities.

He stood there staring at himself in the bathroom mirror as he washed his hands. He was just as surprised by his sudden growth spurt as his aunt and uncle were. Ever since his Aunt May had noticed how filthy his hands were, he had been consciously trying to keep them clean so no one would put him on the spot and ask him why they were so dirty. However, it was becoming more difficult to keep them clean due to him crawling on the walls on a daily basis. He had tried wearing cloth gloves once he realized he could still cling to the surface of the wall with his socks on, but they didn't prevent his hands from getting dirty and would rip after an hour or two of using them. He wished he could find gloves that would prevent his hands from getting so dirty. It was becoming extremely difficult to get them clean, and washing them so often left his hands feeling raw.

It had been an emotional day for him; he still hadn't given himself time to properly grieve. He had been caught up trying to comprehend everything that was happening to him. He'd been using his new abilities as a way to escape from the reality of his current circumstance, rather than facing his parents' death. It was quiet at the house now that his Uncle Ben had gone back to work. He had taken care of his brother Richard's affairs, selling his home, and had the attorney he hired transfer the money to a high-interest trust savings account for Peter. Ben had been a city electrician for over thirty-four years. Being fifteen years older than Richard, he was set to retire soon.

The weekend came. They were sitting at the table eating lunch when the doorbell rang. Ben got up and opened the front door to find a middle-aged man he had never met standing there.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Parker. My name is Reed Richards. I was a

colleague of your brother's. We were good friends. I came to offer my condolences. Sadly, I wasn't able to attend Richard and Mary's funeral. My wife and I were in an accident, and we were in the hospital. I hope this isn't a bad time," said Reed, politely.

"No, not at all. We're just finishing lunch. Would you like to come in?" asked Ben, somewhat caught off guard, having never met Reed before.

"I appreciate the offer, but I can't stay. I just wanted to pay my respects and check in on Peter. I heard that Peter had not been back to Oscorp since the accident and didn't attend his graduation. I was wondering if he would be coming back next year," asked Reed, curiously.

"I don't think that would be appropriate after the allegations that were made in the newspaper," said Ben, directly.

"Allegations? Forgive me, I've been in a medically induced coma for the past couple of months and only just found out about the car accident that Richard and Mary were in. I'm not sure I understand what you mean. What allegations were made in the newspaper?" asked Reed.

Ben wasn't comfortable talking about this to a stranger but could sense the man had no ill intent.

"They wrote in the paper that Richard, Mary, and his colleague, Curt Conners, had committed treason," said Ben, as he observed the man's reaction.

"Treason? That's absurd. There must be some mistake," said Reed, wishing he had inquired more about what had taken place before coming to pay his respects.

He had been informed that Richard and Mary were in a terrible car accident and that their son Peter had been taken in by Richard's older brother. He found out about their passing from Ben Grimm's fiancée, Alicia Masters. She explained to him during her visit to Ravencroft that she had received word from Oscorp regarding the incident.

Alicia tried getting in touch with Richard after speaking with Mr. Osborn, hoping to find out if he'd heard from us or anyone from Oscorp following the accident during our expedition into the Mariana Trench. She was concerned that Ben had still not called her and wanted to know if Richard had heard anything about the team's condition. That must be why Oscorp informed her of Richard and Mary's passing, thought Reed.

Ben stood there in the doorway, uncomfortable talking about his brother while Peter was within earshot. However, he didn't want to seem rude, as the man genuinely seemed appalled by the accusations that Richard and Mary committed treason.

"I have no idea what could have led to such accusations, but I don't

believe it for one second. I knew Richard for ten years—he was a good man and had always been a straight shooter," said Reed, feeling angry and emotional.

"I appreciate the sentiment. It means a lot," said Ben, seeing the man was visibly upset.

"Where will Peter go to school now?" asked Reed.

"We're looking to enroll him in the public school nearby," said Ben.

"Public school? The public school board would be of no benefit to a boy of his intelligence. I'm certain I could talk to Mr. Osborn and arrange for him to continue his education at Oscorp," said Reed.

"I appreciate the offer, but I couldn't condone him going back there after the accusations that were made," said Ben.

Reed stood there in the doorway, wanting to insist that there would be nothing the public school board could teach the boy but refrained out of respect.

"That's unfortunate but given the circumstances, I understand. If I may, would you mind if I offered Peter my condolences? I'd very much like to see him before I leave," asked Reed.

Ben contemplated the request for a moment but agreed. He turned to go inform Peter of their guest. Peter came to the door and found Dr. Richards standing there, to his surprise.

"Dr. Richards!" exclaimed Peter, as he ran and hugged Reed unexpectedly.

He embraced the boy, completely shocked by how much he had changed in a few short months; he barely recognized him.

"Peter, you've grown so much! You're as big as me now," said Reed, as he stood there with his hands on his shoulders, looking at him in disbelief.

"My aunt and uncle were just as surprised. They said I sprouted overnight," laughed Peter, excited to see his hero standing in front of him.

"I'm so terribly sorry I wasn't at your parents' funeral, Peter. There was an accident. The team and I suffered some medical complications after our dive into the Mariana Trench. I've been in the hospital for the past couple of months," explained Reed.

"What kind of accident? Is everyone okay?" asked Peter, surprised by the news.

Gwen had told Peter that the team had been working out of another facility but never mentioned anything about an accident. Reed searched for a simple explanation, realizing he had already disclosed too much, but felt at

the very least he owed the boy an explanation as to why he was absent from his parents' funeral.

"The medical staff believe, in time, we should fully recover. They've been monitoring our condition closely. I'm more concerned with how you're doing. I'm saddened to hear you won't be returning to Oscorp to continue your education. Although, it seems my team and I have been relocated to another facility for the time being," said Reed.

Most likely Ravencroft, thought Peter, but didn't ask, as it didn't seem appropriate.

"I told your uncle that I would gladly speak to Mr. Osborn on your behalf if you wanted to continue your education at Oscorp," said Reed, curious to see how Peter would react to the offer.

He wanted nothing more than to go back to Oscorp with Gwen and pretend like everything was alright but knew he couldn't.

"I appreciate that, Dr. Richards, but I can't. It wouldn't be the same without my parents," said Peter.

"I understand. If you ever need anything, I'm here," said Reed, somewhat disappointed.

Peter suddenly had a thought. It was something that was completely out of character and extremely risky, but it was too good an opportunity to pass up.

"I do have something I wanted to ask you, Dr. Richards. I'm not sure if you could help me; I left my sweater in your office the Saturday my dad and I came to visit you before you left for the expedition in Guam. My dad got me that sweater for my birthday, and it's been bothering me that I forgot it. You mentioned you're working out of another facility now, but do you think it would be possible to arrange a day for me to go and pick it up from Oscorp? It would just be for a moment; I'd be in and out," said Peter, feeling uncertain of the plan he had in mind.

Reed thought for a moment, wanting to do what he could for the boy.

"I don't think it would be a problem. I'll reach out to Mr. Osborn and see if I can arrange a day for you to go and pick it up," said Reed, as he put his hand on Peter's shoulder.

"Thank you, Dr. Richards. I appreciate you coming by. It's so great to see you," said Peter, genuinely.

"Of course, Peter. I'll always be here if you need anything. Here's my card if you ever need to get ahold of me," said Reed, as he handed Peter two cards.

Peter looked at the cards, noticing they were the same. Reed pulled a pen out of his pocket and handed it to him.

"Write down your contact information on the back of one of the cards for me. I'll be in touch once I speak to Mr. Osborn. I'll try and talk him into letting you go to my office to get your sweater," said Reed.

Peter handed him back the card after writing his phone number on the back of it for him.

"I appreciate that, Dr. Richards—it means a lot to me. Thank you," said Peter, as he embraced Reed before he left.

Reed walked down the steps of the house and got into his vehicle as Peter watched him drive off. He was glad he got to see Dr. Richards, but it left him feeling empty afterwards, realizing it was something else that would never be the same.

He felt guilty for the plan he had suddenly come up with after Dr. Richards commented about him being the same size as he was now. He remembered Dr. Richards showing him and his father the demo suits that were sent to him from Ravencroft. It made him think to ask if he could get his sweater back as an excuse to gain access to Dr. Richards' office to see if the demo suits, which had likely been forgotten about, were still there.

Dr. Richards is working out of Ravencroft, and they're only demo suits, he thought, as he tried to justify the fact that he was plotting to steal from Oscorp, just as his father had.

He realized that he would need something like the demo suits if he ever wanted to leave the abandoned factory and explore the city using his newfound abilities. He remembered Dr. Richards explaining that once the sealant was applied to the suits, they would become virtually indestructible. It was also dirt and germ resistant, which would be invaluable. He had been crawling around so much lately, his hands had become noticeably filthy. It was becoming increasingly difficult to explain to his Aunt May why he couldn't get them clean. He also realized that if he were to get the demo suits, he'd be able to sneak into the sewer without worrying about the sanitary conditions and finally be able to see if the stories were true about the lizard. Despite how irrational it was, he couldn't shake the desire to see if he could track the creature down.

He went back inside and sat down at the table to finish his lunch while his Uncle Ben stood at the sink rinsing his plate.

"Your father's friend said that he had been hospitalized for the last couple of months. Did he say why?" asked Ben.

"There was some sort of accident during their deep-sea expedition into the Mariana Trench. My father and I went to see him the day he left for

Guam. It was the last time we saw him before my parents passed away," said Peter, reflecting on the past.

"He seemed genuine. He said he was good friends with your father," said Ben, curious to know more about the man.

"Dr. Richards works for Oscorp's Institution of Oceanography. My father used to say he was the most brilliant man he'd ever met," said Peter, staring off, somewhat saddened by the memory.

He finished his breakfast and rinsed his dish in the sink before heading upstairs to plot out how he was going to pull off getting the demo suits he hoped were still in Dr. Richards' office at Oscorp.

A couple of weeks later, he received a call from Dr. Richards. He had managed to persuade Norman Osborn to allow Peter to pick up the sweater he had left in his office. Peter was ecstatic that Dr. Richards had actually come through for him, convincing Mr. Osborn to let him back into Oscorp. Of course, he would have to go through the security protocol, as was to be expected. However, he had devised a plan to get past Oscorp's security. Reed asked Peter what day of that week would be best for him to go and pick up the sweater. Peter cleverly mentioned that his Uncle Ben was now back at work and that the weekend would be more convenient. Peter was aware that there would be less staff on-site during the weekend, which would work to his advantage. Reed decided that he could arrange to have one of the student interns that was working at the laboratory that weekend escort him in to get the sweater. Once the date was set, Peter had to prepare the rest of his plan, praying that he would be lucky enough to pull it off. If not, he would have to suffer the consequences of stealing from Oscorp and betraying the trust of his idol, Dr. Richards.

However, he didn't view it as stealing from Dr. Richards—he would never do that. He justified his actions, thinking Dr. Richards and the team already had their semi-dry suits made for them. These were just demo suits that would likely never be used. He didn't feel bad taking the demo suits from Oscorp. He felt what Oscorp had taken from him was far greater.

He confirmed the date with his Uncle Ben, ensuring he would have a way to Oscorp and back, leaving only one thing left for his plan to be complete. That afternoon for lunch, he asked his Aunt May if she could make him a specific type of sandwich. He requested that she make two egg salad sandwiches for him. He remembered the story his father had told him about Mr. Berkley when his parents first started working at Oscorp. He had been to Oscorp during the weekend with his parents many times over the years and knew that Mr. Berkley would be working. His Aunt May agreed to make him two egg salad sandwiches as he requested. He hid them in a container in his room, allowing them to age over the next few days. The night before they were scheduled to go to Oscorp, Peter checked on the sandwiches, which

had become extremely potent smelling. He lay in bed feeling nervous, unsure if he should go through with the plan he had carefully devised. Going against his better judgment, his desire to be able to leave the abandoned factory and use his new abilities to explore the sewers to try and find the lizard somehow outweighed his fear of being caught.

That morning, he woke up to his Aunt May knocking on his door, telling him to get dressed and come down for breakfast. His anxiety began the moment he opened his eyes, knowing that he was going to make a decision today that could potentially change his life forever. He got his backpack ready and packed two old jackets that were now too small, along with the sandwich container, before going downstairs. The container prevented the smell of the aged sandwiches from being detected. He set his backpack down next to the door before going to eat his breakfast. They left shortly after breakfast. The drive there wasn't too far. They were approximately a forty-minute drive from Oscorp Industries, which was located in Lower Manhattan. When they arrived at the security gate, they gave their names to the security guard, who checked the records and found they were scheduled in that day. He opened the gate, allowing them to pass. Uncle Ben waited in the car while Peter got out with his backpack and went inside. He was greeted by Mr. Berkley, whom he hadn't seen since the day his parents breached security, making it slightly awkward. He set his backpack on the conveyor and walked through the scanner. Mr. Berkley walked around the desk, picked Peter's backpack up off the conveyor, and handed it to him.

"I'm terribly sorry about what happened to your parents. I always thought they were good people. Just wait here for a minute; I've been told that an intern is going to accompany you to get the sweater out of Dr. Richards' office," said Mr. Berkley as he turned and walked back into the security booth.

Peter nodded to acknowledge the sentiment and waited for the student intern to come and escort him to Dr. Richards' office. He realized he likely wouldn't be able to take the demo suits with the intern accompanying him as he stood there, disappointed. The student intern walked down the hall as Peter watched him approach, anxiously. Mr. Berkley stepped outside the booth and told Peter he could go with the intern. The intern was young and set to graduate this year in marine biology while gaining practical experience at Oscorp during the summer. If the circumstances were different, Peter would have already asked the student intern several questions by this point but remained silent as they made their way down the hallway corridor. The intern looked into the retinal scanner and tapped his security card to the panel, opening the laboratory door as Peter walked through.

The memory of his father and Dr. Richards talking the day he left for the expedition played in his mind vividly as he walked towards Dr. Richards' office. The office door was already open when a lab technician unexpectedly

called out to the student intern that was escorting Peter. He asked the intern if he would mind showing him where he had stored the file they were working on earlier. The intern told him he'd be right there, asking Peter if he was okay to get the sweater from the office. Peter said yes as his heart began to race, knowing that this was his opportunity to take the demo suits.

He walked into the office and quickly looked between the wall and the desk, seeing the briefcase was still there. His hands were shaking, and his breathing came in shallow, ragged gasps as he raced to open the briefcase. He threw his backpack on the chair and pulled the suits out of the briefcase. He set them on the desk as he pulled the two jackets out of his backpack and hung them next to his sweater that was still hanging on the coat rack. He brought the two jackets to leave there so the change in weight of his backpack wouldn't seem too drastic on the conveyor when he went back through the security checkpoint. He quickly stuffed two of the three demo suits into his backpack along with two sets of goggles and all three bottles of sealant. He remembered Dr. Richards telling him and his father that the team selected the light blue and black suit with white trim. Therefore, he decided to take the other two demo suits instead. He took the detachable ice hoods, dive socks, and gloves that went with the suits as well, then quickly stuffed his sweater in the bag. He opened the lid of the container holding the sandwiches and zipped up the backpack, frantically throwing everything else back into the suitcase, worried the intern would appear any moment and catch him in the act.

Thankfully, there were no cameras in the offices, only in the laboratory. Peter slid the briefcase back between the wall and the desk and stood there in the doorway of Dr. Richards' office, trying to gather himself, while his heart pounded, waiting for the intern to return. A few minutes later, the student intern returned to bring Peter back to the security desk. They made their way out of the laboratory and down the hallway corridor, as Peter's entire body trembled. He desperately tried to calm down and settle his nerves before going through the security scan with the demo suits in his backpack. His legs felt as though they were going to give out on him. He was so scared, but it was too late—they had already reached the security gate. The intern turned and walked away as Mr. Berkley exited the booth, instructing Peter to set the backpack on the conveyor and walk through the scanner. He walked through the scanner as the backpack passed through on the conveyor. Suddenly, there was a buzzer noise that went off as Mr. Berkley checked the code that the system was giving him.

"It's giving me an error code for different weight and contents in the bag. I'm going to have to open the backpack and check the contents myself," said Mr. Berkley, as he picked the backpack up off the conveyor belt.

Peter's heart was pounding so hard he could barely hear what Mr. Berkley said, as his whole body trembled.

"It might be because I put the sweater in the bag. I probably should have just carried it out," said Peter, trying his best to sound as casual as possible, while he silently prayed for a miracle.

Mr. Berkley opened the backpack and was hit with the foul odor of spoiled eggs. He immediately set the backpack down on the conveyor, seeing the sweater in the bag as he turned away and began to dry heave. Peter walked over to Mr. Berkley, feigning concern for the man, as if he didn't know what was going on.

"Mr. Berkley, are you alright?" asked Peter, who was still shaking, as he watched Mr. Berkley struggle to compose himself.

"I'm fine, I just smell something," said Mr. Berkley, as he heaved mid-sentence.

Peter picked up the backpack and opened it wider to let the aroma out, seeing that his father had not exaggerated the story of Mr. Berkley's sensitivity to the scent of eggs. Making sure Mr. Berkley could visibly see the sweater as he held the backpack open, he continued to show concern for the man. He had turned extremely pale and was visibly nauseous from the smell that permeated from the backpack.

"It's fine, I can see the sweater. You're cleared to go," said Mr. Berkley, trying to keep himself from vomiting in the foyer.

Peter zipped the backpack up without hesitation, thanked the man, and made his way through the exit. His heart was pounding and his body was trembling, but he was completely elated. He walked to the car, opened the backpack, and sealed the lid to the container shut. He kept the bag open as he made his way to the car in an attempt to air it out as much as possible before getting into the vehicle with Uncle Ben. The smell was absolutely rancid. Luckily, the container was only opened briefly, and the bag wasn't too difficult to air out. He got in the car as his mind raced. Every bit of him was bursting with adrenaline. He couldn't believe that his plan actually worked.

"Did you get it?' asked Uncle Ben.

"Yep, I got it," said Peter, so excited he could barely contain himself.

He couldn't wait to try the suits on and get them sealed, as he sat there thinking back on what Dr. Richards had told him and his father about them. When they got home, Peter went upstairs to his bedroom. He set his backpack on the bed, unzipped it, took his sweater and the container with the spoiled sandwiches out, and put his backpack in the closet. He went back downstairs with the container and told his aunt and uncle that he'd be back shortly. He walked down to the local convenience store and threw the sandwiches in the trash, then headed back home.

He went straight upstairs to his bedroom when he got in and locked

the door. He opened the backpack and emptied it onto his bed, admiring the demo suits he risked so much for. He didn't want to have them out of the backpack for long, just in case his aunt or uncle were to knock and try to come in. He was supposed to fix the wall with his Uncle Ben at some point this afternoon. His uncle bought drywall putty and a tin of paint for the wall once it was patched. He sat there inspecting the demo suits, realizing they both had The Fantastic Four symbol on the chest, which would give the suits away if he was ever spotted in them. He sat there thinking of a way he could cover the symbol without damaging the suits before sealing them. He remembered Dr. Richards telling them that once the suits were sealed, they could not be altered, which meant if he wanted to change something, it would have to be done before they were sealed. He put the suits in his backpack and zipped it up. He set the bag in the closet and shut the door, thinking he would need to find a safe place to keep the suits so they wouldn't be found.

He was exhausted, his adrenaline had been pumping all morning, and he needed to rest. He lay down on his bed thinking about where the lizard had first been reported in the subway station. He didn't know where the sewer maintenance person saw it, as it wasn't disclosed by the news station. However, the subway station where it was first reported wasn't far. He figured he could start there to see if he could find an entrance point that led down into the sewer system.

He had fallen asleep for a little over an hour before his aunt knocked on the door and woke him up, telling him to come downstairs: lunch was ready. He sat up, completely out of it, realizing he must have dozed off. He was still half asleep as he sat there a moment trying to wake up, yawning with his arms outstretched. He got out of bed, went downstairs to the kitchen, and sat down at the table. He didn't sleep well last night, and the adrenaline from this morning only left him feeling more fatigued. However, after eating lunch, he felt recharged and was ready to repair the hole in his bedroom wall with his Uncle Ben.

They went upstairs and got to work repairing the damaged wall, using a drywall patch kit and putty. They mixed the drywall compound by stirring it, then smoothed the putty over the patch kit that was used to fill the hole and sanded it down once it was dry. They took a short break after they had patched the hole and then went to work painting the wall. His uncle explained that he chose to use acrylic paint rather than regular latex paint because it would dry faster.

"What's the difference between the two types of paint?" asked Peter, curiously.

"The main difference between the two paints is that acrylic paint is chemical-based and latex paint is water-based. The chemicals in acrylic paint

make it more elastic than latex paint. Acrylic paint contracts and expands better than latex paint," explained Uncle Ben.

Peter knew his way around the laboratory as well as anyone at Oscorp but had little to no experience with home repairs. While his uncle was explaining the difference between the two paints, he had another question come to mind.

"Can you use acrylic paint on fabric?" asked Peter.

"Sure, I used it on my old t-shirts and jeans when I was young. You just have to make sure to heat it afterwards with an iron or hair dryer and make sure when you wash it that it's in cold water," said Uncle Ben.

That's perfect! I can use the acrylic paint to cover The Fantastic Four symbol on the suits tonight while the room still smells of paint, thought Peter.

When they were finished painting, Uncle Ben informed Peter that he was in charge of cleaning the paintbrushes. He instructed Peter to put them in a plastic bag when the brushes were clean and set them with the paint cans in the garage. Peter agreed to clean the paintbrushes and thanked his uncle for teaching him how to repair the wall in his room. Before Uncle Ben went downstairs, he told Peter he would need to open his window and stay out of the room for the rest of the day to let it air out. He followed his uncle downstairs and waited a few hours before sneaking back up to his room and quietly locking his door to cover The Fantastic Four emblem with acrylic paint before the smell in his room was gone. This was the perfect opportunity, as the smell of paint was still fresh and wouldn't raise any questions from his aunt and uncle.

He pulled the suits out of his backpack and set them on the bed. The shimmering metallic blue suit appeared black indoors as he looked at the white emblem of the number four on the chest with a circle around it. He realized that the red and blue suit's emblem of the number four was black, which would likely be more difficult to hide if he used white acrylic paint to cover it. He decided that he would hold off on using the red and blue suit for now. He could use the shimmering metallic dark blue suit until he had the opportunity to get some black acrylic paint for the red and blue suit. He put the red and blue suit back into his bag and laid the metallic dark blue suit on the floor. He had been thinking about what he could do to cover the emblem all afternoon while he was waiting for his room to air out. He had the idea of creating his own emblem, which he hoped would also serve to make the demo suits less noticeable should anyone ever see him.

He decided that nothing could be more fitting than a spider emblem for his new suit as he began to paint over The Fantastic Four emblem. He kept the design of the spider as basic as possible, painting over the circular emblem that already existed, then making a larger circle below it as the

lower half of the spider's body. He used a smaller paintbrush to create the legs of the spider using a simple technique of making a straight line moving away from the body, then making an upside-down V-shape and extending the eight legs, four on either side, all the way under the arms of the suit. He painted two little chelicerae at the head of the spider, which he learned from his father were what the fangs of an arachnid were called. He then painted two little spinnerets extending from its abdomen, which were used to spin its web. He was so impressed with the spider design he painted on the front of the suit that once it dried, he decided to copy it on the back of the suit. He connect the spider's legs under the arms of the suit, giving it a unique look. He painted a small white square on the top part of each glove to make the suit look more distinct and less like the demo suit made by Ravencroft. He made two small incisions in the wrist of the detachable gloves, which would allow him to shoot his webbing. He was extremely pleased with the outcome of the design he painted. However, he still believed he needed something to cover his face, which would prevent him from being identified if he wanted to start using his abilities outside the confines of the abandoned factory. He was contemplating how to incorporate the detachable ice hood and goggles as a way to hide his identity. He had an idea that would require him to sew, but Peter had never sewn anything before. He had watched his mother sew several items of clothing for him and his father before but never took the time to learn the craft from her. He realized that if he wanted to go into the sewer to try and track the lizard, he would need to mask his identity.

The following morning, Peter asked his Uncle Ben if he could drive him to the public library after breakfast. He told his uncle that he wanted to see if he could locate a research article on NeoGenics his father had published but secretly intended to check out a few books on sewing. He also wanted to see if the library had a copy of the newspaper article on the lizard that Gwen had mentioned at his parents' wake.

He intended to modify the ice hood and goggles to conceal his identity and venture into the sewer to test out the suit. He planned to sew the mouth opening for the breathing tube in the ice hood shut and thought of a way to incorporate the goggles. He'd unfasten the band on one side of the goggles and feed it through the eye opening of the ice hood so the band was on the inside of the ice hood. He could then refasten the band to the goggles through the other eye opening and sew the band from the goggles to the inside of the ice hood. That way, when he put the mask on, the goggles would be fixed to it. He also needed to fold the tiny incision he made in the wrists of the gloves and test it before sewing it to make sure he could shoot his webbing without it being obstructed by the suit.

That evening, he asked his Aunt May if she would let him borrow a needle and black thread and got to work following the instructions on how to sew a backstitch. According to the books he took out from the library, the

backstitch was considered the strongest hand stitch because of its structure. Peter chose the backstitch to sew the mouth opening closed and stitch the goggle band to the inside of the ice hood. Each current stitch overlaps with the previous one, creating a continuous line that is suitable for securing openings where strength is needed and would not come undone. He carefully followed the sewing instructions, completing each task step-by-step until the mouth of the hood had been sewn shut and the strap of the goggles had been sewn to the inside of the ice hood. He was impressed by how well it had turned out, with the stitching being barely noticeable on the black fabric. He sat there thinking that his mother would have been proud of him.

Finally, he tried the suit on, surprised by how comfortable it was, fitting him quite perfectly. If he'd not had his growth spurt when he did, he never would have fit into Dr. Richards' suit. The demo suit was a one-piece suit that zipped up horizontally across the chest and under the armpits with a flap of material that folded down over the waterproof zipper. The one-piece suit had an attached hood, which left his face exposed. After modifying the detachable ice hood and goggles, it became a pullover mask that covered his face.

He folded the fabric back after making tiny incisions in the wrist of both gloves, put a single stitch in each fold, then tested shooting his webbing. He shot his web in several different positions, making the necessary modifications to the incisions to assure the suit didn't impede the webbing, knowing once the sealant was applied there would be no way to change it. He clung to his bedroom wall, twisting and shooting the web at a plastic bag he used as a target to ensure the incisions were perfect. When he was satisfied with the modifications that were made and everything had been carefully tested, he stitched the fabric from the incisions he made in the wrists of the gloves and prepared to seal the suit. He'd taken all three cans of sealant, making sure he would have more than enough to seal the suits. He opened the can of sealant and found that the scent was too strong to use in the house, as he had initially planned to do.

He went into the garage and looked through his uncle's things, finding a small pail that he could use to pour the sealant in. Using an unused paintbrush, he meticulously sealed the entire suit thoroughly, including the detachable gloves, dive socks, and ice hood, careful not to get any sealant on the lenses of the goggles. When he was done, he put the suit in a garbage bag and the mask in a separate plastic bag. He set it in an empty plastic bucket, sealed the lid, and hid it in the overhead storage to dry.

His uncle had to work in the morning and was parked in the driveway, giving Peter the opportunity to hide the suit in the overhead storage without fearing that he would smell it. Afterwards he went inside, washed up, and had dinner with his aunt and uncle. He sat at the dinner table, unable to think about anything other than testing the suit. He thanked

his Aunt May for the meal and went up to his room after dinner to read through the newspaper article he photocopied at the library about the lizard. The subway station was where he would begin his search this coming Friday, giving the suit plenty of time to dry.

With his suit in his backpack, Peter got off the bus and made his way down the steps of the subway station. He sat there waiting for the train with the rest of the people on the platform, quite certain that what he was about to do was most illogical. He had tried to talk himself out of going down into the sewer to look for some fictitious creature that was likely the insensible fantasy of an overactive imagination. However, he recalled Dr. Richards telling him and his father that once the suit was sealed, it was germproof and dirt resistant, which somehow seemed to justify this insanity.

He told his aunt and uncle that he was going to the library, which worked out well, as it was approximately fifteen minutes from the train station. He arranged to be picked up at 9pm, thinking that would give him plenty of time to search the sewer and look for the alleged creature. It would also give him a chance to explore freely in his new suit, which he couldn't wait to try out. He had never used his newfound abilities outside the confines of the abandoned factory, due to the risk of being seen. Having the suit prevented him from being identified, but he still didn't want to take the chance of being seen.

The train could be heard coming. He stood up and made his way towards the far end of the station. He waited for the passengers to board the train and the doors to shut as he stood there observing those remaining on the platform. When the train began to move, he casually made his way towards the moving cars, and as soon as the last car passed, he dropped down silently onto the tracks. He waited a moment, staying tight against the wall in case he misread the crowd on the platform. His heart raced as he wondered if he'd been noticed, but to his surprise, he had gone undetected.

He stayed low to the ground and ran along the wall as quickly as possible in an effort to get around the bend and out of sight from those remaining on the platform. He walked briskly along the tracks looking for any signs or passageways into the sewer. In time, he came across the sewer maintenance gate, which appeared to have been damaged. Upon closer inspection, he noticed that the concrete looked like it had claw marks in it, as if an animal had burrowed into it. Part of it appeared to have been chiseled with a tool to create a larger opening. His heart rate increased with anticipation, realizing that he had located a passageway into the sewer and could finally test his abilities in the suit.

Peter set his backpack down and pulled out the suit, excited to test it for the first time. He quickly got undressed and put his clothing in his backpack. He pushed the backpack through the gap in the gate, then crawled

through the opening. He set his backpack down, leaving it on the inside ledge of the maintenance gate, and climbed down the ladder into the sewer tunnel. The ground was wet; each step he took splashed through the ankle-deep water, as the sound echoed throughout the sewer tunnel. He decided it was safer to crawl along the walls of the tunnel. If there was something down here, he didn't want to alert it and make himself a target by being too loud.

He had an eerie feeling as he moved along the walls of the tunnel. He couldn't explain it, but he felt that something wasn't right. He came to an intersecting passage and noticed what appeared to be blood stains splattered on the walls of the tunnel. He was surprised at how well he could see in the tunnel once his eyes adjusted, given how dark it was. He could see that there was damage to the tunnel walls all throughout the four-way intersection as though something had happened there. He carefully examined the damages, realizing that there were some spots that resembled what appeared to be bullet holes. He inspected the area further and found several shell casings in the ankle-deep sewage water, confirming his theory.

Someone has definitely been down here to clean things up and try and hide whatever happened, he thought, as he put the shell case down.

He could see that whoever was sent to clean up the scene tried to remove the blood splatter on the walls of the tunnel but missed some of it, indicating that there was a major incident that took place at this location. He concluded that there were several people walking through the tunnel, as fresh prints could still be seen in the thin layer of sediment just beneath the water, along with another set of tracks that definitely weren't human. Their footsteps must have been echoing off the brick as they made their way through the circular tunnel, alerting the creature of their presence. It appeared they were ambushed by the creature, causing them to fire their weapons rashly. He wondered if they managed to capture it, as he carefully analyzed the scene, examining all the bullet holes in the brick. The more he inspected the scene, the more convinced he became of the lizard story.

He found evidence of the creature's tracks down each direction of the intersecting tunnel, wondering which way he should go from here. He didn't want to get too deep into the tunnels and forget which way he came in; it wouldn't be hard to get lost. He decided to look for clues while traveling a short way down each direction of the tunnels. If he didn't find anything after roughly thirty minutes, he'd turn back and try going in a different direction. He went west first and saw no signs of bullet holes or any fresh footprints in the sediment that would lead him to suspect the group of armed men had tracked the creature that way. After making his way back to the intersection of the tunnel, he decided to go east. He proceeded down the tunnel. Seeing no signs or footprints indicating that the creature went that way, he turned back. He made his way back to the intersection of the tunnel. The only way left to go was north, the direction he was initially going when

he came to the intersection. He proceeded on, somewhat relieved, thinking it would be less to remember coming back if he just had to go straight down the same tunnel. He carried on for what felt like an eternity before he came across something lying half submerged in the water. He approached, realizing it was the remains of a large sewer rat. He had failed to notice until now, but strangely enough, the sewer had been rodent-free.

He continued on through the sewer, unable to shake the feeling that something was off. He came to the end of the tunnel and found that the opening led down into a water drainage pool, which branched off into three smaller tunnels that ran down into a storm drain and mixed with raw sewage. The smell was pungent. He clung to the wall above the tunnel opening, looking around. The area was large, and poorly lit. He scanned the area as his eyes darted back and forth. He was feeling uneasy, as if something was wrong. His first instinct was to leave immediately, although he ignored the feeling, uncertain why he felt it, but he had a premonition that something terrible was going to happen.

He heard what sounded like a snake hissing just below his feet, he glanced down when suddenly the creature lunged up from the water. It swiped at him, just missing, as he jumped nearly thirty feet across the drainage pool and into the water. Submerged and disoriented, he resurfaced to find the creature moving towards him in the water at incredible speed. In a panic, he began to swim, realizing he could not get away, as the creature was almost right on top of him. He threw his arm up out of the water instinctively and shot his webbing, striking the wall. In an instant, with one sharp yank of his arm, he shot out of the water, hitting the wall with enormous velocity. His adrenaline had taken over—he had never moved at such speed, nor did he know he could. The creature sprang out of the water, matching his speed with a ferocity that could not be described. Its red eyes appeared like burning coals, flickering in the darkness, as the reptilian demon lunged at him. The creature was more terrifying than anything he could have imagined. He sprang off the wall, jumping as far as he could this time, clearing the entire pool and landing on the opposite wall. His heart was pounding as he tried to think of how he could escape. He realized that if the creature were to get a hold of him, he would most certainly be killed. He figured if he tried to make his way back through the tunnel he came in, it would easily catch him in a closed-in space.

Think, Peter, think!

He looked around desperately for an alternate exit as the creature jumped up out of the water seemingly even faster than before. The creature had mutated exponentially since attacking the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agents. Its height remained roughly the same at just over six feet tall, but it now resembled more of a lizard than a human, having grown a tail that was approximately five feet in length. Peter was beginning to panic, as he saw no clear route out

of there other than how he came in. In addition to that, the lizard seemed to be getting increasingly agitated as Peter continued to narrowly evade it.

He wasn't sure how long he could keep this pace up for; one misstep could be the end. He could sense how fierce the creature was, as it pursued him relentlessly. This time it darted out of the water and predicted he'd jump off the wall, as he had the last time. It hit the wall and sprang off it with such force that it took him by surprise; with its arms outstretched, it was about to grab him. Peter reacted instinctively, shooting his web, targeting the adjacent wall. He yanked the web, narrowly avoiding its claws as the creature swiped, just missing him. He hit the wall with a sudden impact, unsure what just happened. It was as though his body was moving on its own accord. Peter had practiced clinging to walls and hitting bottles with his webbing in the abandoned factory, but he had never moved like he was now. He wasn't aware that he could move at such speed, demonstrating agility, and reflexes that bordered on precognition.

He shot his web again; it hit just above the tunnel opening. Pulling the web as hard as he could, he propelled himself like a slingshot into the tunnel opening. The creature pursued him as it barreled through the water towards the tunnel opening at an unnatural speed. Peter hydroplaned across the wet surface of the tunnel, regaining his footing as he slid. He ran as fast as his legs could move; water splashed beneath his feet, making it difficult to hear anything behind him. Suddenly, without warning, he reacted intuitively, jumping and clinging to the roof of the tunnel as the creature swiped, just missing as it lunged past him. It spun in the ankle-deep water, hissing and looking up at him as he clung to the roof of the tunnel upside down. Its red eyes were burning fiercely as the creature sprang at him. Without a moment to think, he pushed off the roof of the tunnel as the creature lunged forward and attacked. His hands splashed into the water as he pushed off into a front handspring, twisting and propelling himself past the creature onto the wall of the tunnel directly behind it. The lizard turned to attack again. Peter instinctively shot his web through the murky sewage water, trapping the creature's foot to the tunnel floor. The creature's attack fell just short as it furiously lunged to free itself while it swiped its claws and hissed. The attempt at subduing it only seemed to anger the creature. It began clawing at the webbing while it repeatedly lunged at him. Being in water, the web didn't hold for long but served more as a distraction.

Peter dropped down from the wall of the tunnel and began running frantically, trying to create as much distance between himself and the creature as possible. His mind was fixated on one thing: getting to the sewer maintenance gate so he could get to the surface and escape the pursuit of the lizard. He couldn't hear anything as he ran. His heart was beating so loud he could barely hear the splashing beneath his feet as he turned to look over his shoulder. He was terrified the creature would suddenly spring out of the

darkness as he ran through the tunnel. He was feeling more and more claustrophobic, almost to the point of hysteria, as he came to the four-way intersection of the tunnel system. He was almost at the maintenance gate when suddenly, he sensed something. He turned to look over his shoulder and jumped spontaneously, clinging to the roof of the tunnel. The creature had managed to catch up to him as it charged furiously in the narrow tunnel, jumping up at him. He sprang down from the roof of the tunnel, spinning as he landed on all fours and splashing into the water. In the closed quarters of the tunnel, it was much harder to evade the attacks of the creature, as it could use the tunnel walls and roof to push off of, just as he had. He spun around to see the creature lunging toward him through the air as he leapt, his body twisting mid-jump as he landed, clinging to the wall of the tunnel. The creature crashed down into the water, spinning to face him as Peter shot his webbing, pinning its foot again. Aware that the creature had already freed itself from his web once before, he knew it would likely be less effective this time. He sprang down off the tunnel wall and began running desperately, feeling like it was right behind him, about to sink its teeth and claws into him at any moment. He could see the ladder and ran towards it as fast as he possibly could, jumping to it as soon as he was close enough. He crashed into it, grabbing hold of the ladder. He looked down the tunnel, seeing the creature's red eyes as it was barreling towards him.

Frantic, he climbed the ladder as fast as he could. He made it to the gate, grabbed his backpack off the ledge, and thrust it through the opening. He reached through with one arm as he could hear the creature slam into the ladder below him. Panic-stricken, he screamed out as he pushed himself through, narrowly escaping the creature as it swiped at him. He stumbled to his feet, turning to see the creature clawing and hissing as it climbed through the opening to pursue him onto the train tracks. He grabbed his backpack off the ground and continued running along the train tracks towards the platform. The creature clawed its way through the opening between the wall and the maintenance gate and was catching up to him. It was faster on foot than he was. Its bone structure had mutated to such an extent that it ran on its toes, which had become elongated. The bones in its legs appeared to bend backwards but was actually the calcaneus, which was originally his heel bone before he began mutating, making the creature extremely fast on foot.

The backpack wasn't heavy but felt as though it was slowing him down as he desperately ran from the creature. He realized as he headed back towards the subway platform that there would most likely be a crowd of people there but knew of no other alternate route he could take to escape the creature. It was directly behind him as he approached the platform, where numerous people were standing, waiting for the train.

He tried calling out for everyone to run as he jumped up onto the platform, but they just stood there, unfazed by the terror in his voice.

Suddenly, the creature came surging up towards him from the shadows, causing everyone to run and scream hysterically. He dodged the creature narrowly as his body twisted and spun, landing several feet away from it on the subway platform. He didn't have time to think or comprehend what was happening in the moment as people began to scatter, panic-stricken. It served as a distraction; the creature's attention locked onto the people who were running up the stairs of the station, trying to get to the surface. It darted towards them, forcing Peter to confront the creature instead of running from it, which had been his only objective since encountering it in the sewer. He shot his web, hitting the creature in the back and restraining it for a moment as it tried to attack the people who were running. The creature lashed out aggressively, fighting to free itself as it turned to see Peter struggling to restrain it, pulling the thin strand of web with all his might. It charged toward him ferociously. He jumped over it as it lunged, swiping and missing as it spun around on the subway platform. While in the air, he realized he had jumped too high out of fear, and the creature was already right on top of him as he was landing. Without time to think, he shot his web, hitting the platform wall. Pulling himself as hard as he could, he redirected himself and where he would land. He had never used his web like this before but realized how useful it had been in the moment as he propelled himself to the wall. The creature moved at an unnatural speed, almost reaching him the second he landed.

The people on the platform had now cleared out, leaving just him and the creature. He sprang down off the wall, narrowly avoiding the creature's attacks, and leapt high up onto the adjacent wall of the subway station. The creature relentlessly pursued, as it ran vertically up the wall after him, as though it could defy gravity. He dashed off the wall and shot his web as the creature swiped at him. The web hit the wall next to the stairs. He pulled as hard as he could, propelling himself towards the stairway. His adrenaline surged as he managed to slingshot himself directly to the web he had shot. He hit the wall and dropped down, running up the stairs as the creature darted after him. He reached the top of the stairway, realizing it was now dark outside. He had lost all sense of time while down in the sewer and was disoriented.

He could see there were still plenty of people lingering outside the subway station. Aware that the creature would appear any second, he tried to get to an advantageous position to keep its attention. He leapt up onto a street lamp roughly fifteen feet into the air as the creature appeared, causing people to flee in a panic. It paused for a moment, looking for him, and took off in the direction of the first group of people in its sights who were running away. Peter shot his web, hitting the creature's foot, stopping it dead as it fell forward, hissing and clawing at the web. He knew the webbing would be more effective on concrete than it was in the wet sewer but judged it likely

wouldn't restrain it for long as he looked around for a route that he could use to lure the creature away from the crowd of people.

While he desperately scanned the area, he noticed a man in a leather coat across the street with a camera in his hands taking pictures of him and the creature. Shocked that the man was calm enough in the situation to do something that crazy, he turned back to see the creature had freed itself and was running towards him. He sprang down off the lamp pole and shot his web, hitting the creature under its arm, and pulled as hard as he could. The creature was pulled off its feet momentarily but regained its footing almost immediately, darting towards Peter. He lured it in the opposite direction of the crowd of people, towards the East River.

He shot his web, hit a lamp post, and pulled the web as hard as he could, propelling himself through the air. He landed, clinging to the post as he looked back at the creature chasing him relentlessly. He was almost near the river. He screamed to warn the people ahead to run, to no avail. They stood there looking at the strange costume he wore. Some ignored him altogether until the creature was within sight. Each time the creature attempted to attack a group of people, he would slow it down and distract it by using his webbing, giving the people time to run. It only infuriated the creature, causing it to keep chasing him, but it was enough to allow the pedestrians to escape.

He finally made it to the riverfront. He climbed over the railing and clung to the concrete wall below, waiting for the lizard. His heart raced as the creature reached the railing and looked over. Peter shot his web, hitting it directly in the face, and pulled it over the railing, watching it crash into the water as it disappeared out of sight. He wondered if it could have been swept away by the current of the river. He climbed back over the railing and stood there, trying to see where it had disappeared to, as he looked over the ledge into the black water. His heart was still racing as he stood there, expecting the creature to lunge out of the water like some nightmare he couldn't escape.

He made his way to the nearest building and scaled the wall. He sat up on the ledge of the rooftop a moment to catch his breath. His whole body was trembling as he tried to calm himself. He was in a state of shock after going through the psychological trauma of being terrorized by the lizard.

He opened his backpack and looked at his watch; he had completely lost all sense of time in the sewer. It was a quarter past eight, which still gave him plenty of time to get changed and to head back over to the library for nine o'clock. He began to take his clothes out of his backpack, thinking he could get changed on the rooftop, when he suddenly remembered the man in the leather jacket across the street that was taking photos of him and the lizard. He wondered if he should try and locate the man, knowing that the

pictures would be front-page news and could possibly alert those at Ravencroft who made the suit, should they recognize it somehow.

Peter had gone to great lengths painting the spider symbol on the suit to ensure it would be more difficult to identify but was still uncertain that it would be enough. He didn't want to attract attention, believing it was best if he remained unseen. He had learned a useful technique when using his webbing during his encounter with the lizard that would be helpful to remain out of sight while scoping the area for the man in the leather jacket. He walked to the ledge of the building and peeked over the side as he stood there looking across to the adjacent building, which was a good distance away. His adrenaline was still pumping, but not nearly as high as it was when the lizard was chasing him. Still, he judged that he should be able to make it. The rooftop he was on was roughly forty feet in height as he looked down off the ledge, turned, and picked up his backpack.

Look at it this way, Pete, as irrational as this may seem, it still wouldn't be the craziest thing you've done tonight.

He put his backpack on and ran as fast as he could, jumping off the ledge of the building. He shot his web out, hitting the adjacent building, and pulled the web as hard as he possibly could, propelling himself through the air as he landed on the building wall. He clung to it a moment as he looked around, making sure he wasn't seen by anyone down on the street below. He crawled up the side of the building and onto the rooftop, looking back, surprised at the distance he cleared.

He stealthily made his way back to the subway station where he last saw the man in the leather jacket who had taken the photos. He looked around, figuring the man was probably long gone by now and that he would likely be the target of a police investigation by morning. There were several police cruisers arriving at the scene when he saw the man with the leather jacket across the street in a telephone booth outside the coffee shop. He still had the camera hanging from a lanyard around his neck. Peter crawled down the side of the building, waiting to make his move. The man was distracted, talking on the payphone, as Peter clung to the brick wall of the building, watching the man intently.

"I'm telling you, Robbie, these are the shots of the century. Tell Mr. Jameson that they're going to be pricey. I just happened to be meeting my contact from the police department for a coffee when I heard a commotion, and all these people came running up out of the subway station. I was just at the right place at the right time. Maybe my luck's finally starting to change after all. I'll see if there's anyone willing to give a statement, but trust me, Robbie, with the shots I got, we don't need a witness. I'll see you first thing tomorrow," said Brock, as he hung up the payphone and pulled his keys out from his jacket pocket.

Eddie walked across the street towards the parking lot and opened the door to his car as Peter leapt off the wall and landed on top of a street lamp. He shot his web, directly hitting the camera, and yanked it from around Brock's neck. Eddie didn't know what hit him. He glanced down, grabbing his chest, and looked around frantically, trying to understand what just happened. He saw something moving as his eyes scanned the area. He looked up, seeing a dark figure atop the lamp post pulling something up to himself on the end of what appeared to be a long, thin cord. To his horror, the shadowy, masked figure had his camera in his hand and opened the back, taking the undeveloped film out of it, as Brock screamed.

"No, wait! Please, don't!"

Brock ran towards the masked figure on the lamp post as Peter dropped the camera. Brock scrambled to catch it, turning the camera over to find that the roll of film had been taken out.

"No!" he screamed, looking up to find the masked figure gone.

"You bastard! Why?" screamed Brock, as he fell to his knees and began to sob uncontrollably.

"I needed those pictures... Why, God? I needed those pictures so badly. Why would you do this to me?" cried Eddie, as he pounded his fist into the ground.

He raised his head and looked up at the lamp post while tears ran down his face.

"I needed those pictures to get the money for my treatment..."

To Be Continued...